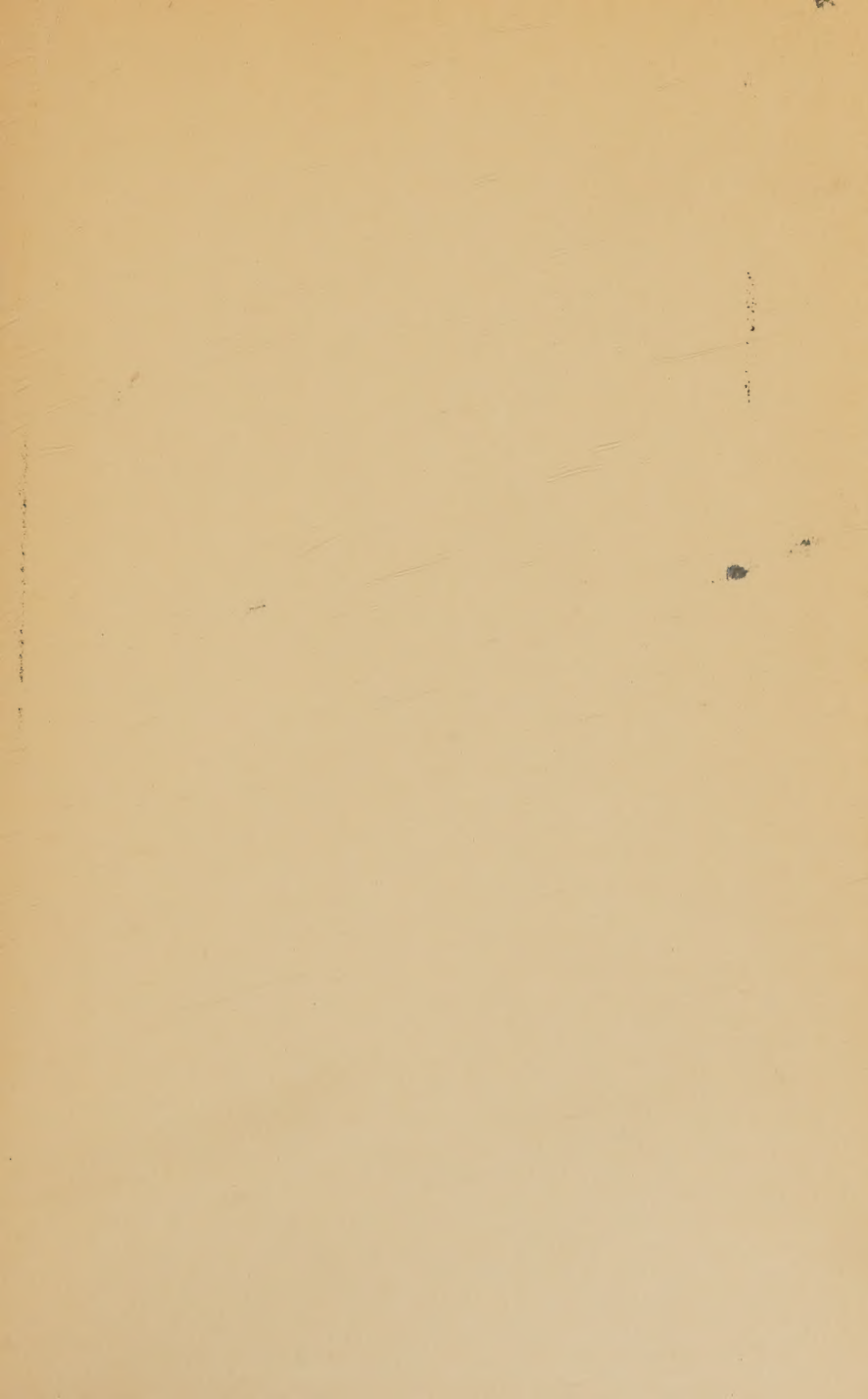




FIGHTING WITH FREMONT

EVERETT MCNEIL

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THURE SAW THAT HE WOULD BE TOO LATE TO SAVE CARSON

FIGHTING WITH FREMONT

A TALE OF THE CONQUEST OF CALIFORNIA

BY

EVERETT McNEIL

AUTHOR OF "WITH KIT CARSON IN THE ROCKIES," "IN TEXAS WITH DAVY CROCKETT," "THE LOST TREASURE CAVE," "THE HERMIT OF THE CULEBRA MOUNTAINS," ETC.



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TO ALL
WHO TAKE A LIVELY INTEREST IN THE WONDERFUL
WESTWARD GROWTH OF THE UNITED STATES
THIS STORY OF SOME OF THE MEN
WHO HELPED TO WIN CALIFORNIA
FOR THE UNION
IS APPRECIATIVELY
DEDICATED

FOREWORD

At the beginning of the year 1846 California was a sparsely-settled, poorly-governed province of Mexico, with only a fringe of indolent Spanish settlers scattered at irregular intervals along the coast and here and there a patriarchal rancho dwelling in the fertile interior valleys. The white population at that time was estimated at about 10,000, of whom, possibly, 2,000 were foreigners, the majority of these foreigners coming from the United States and settling in the Sacramento Valley in the vicinity of Sutter's Fort, then the Mecca of all foreigners, especially if they were from the United States, who came to California. This was all that Spain and Mexico had done for California during the more than three hundred years since the Spanish explorer, Juan Cabrillo, first sailed along its coast and took possession of the country in the name of his sovereign. Then, in 1846, came the war between the United States and Mexico, during which the Conquest of California was achieved and the country became a part of the United States.

The acquisition of California at this time meant very much to the United States; for, two years later, in January, 1848, James W. Marshall picked up that historic bit of yellow metal, from the tail-

race of the saw-mill recently built on the American River near Sutter's Fort, that was to send the worshipers of the yellow god, Gold, hurrying to California from all parts of the civilized world and was to pour a steady stream of gold into the pockets and the treasury of the people of the United States for many years to come—gold that the United States, alas! was soon to need sadly, when, some fourteen years later, began the terrible Civil War that drained the resources of the nation almost to the bottom of the pan. Indeed, many thoughtful historians assert that the integrity of the Union could never have been maintained, if the pockets of the nation had not been filled with California gold, with which to feed and equip and keep in the field for four long years the great armies required to make victory possible.

FIGHTING WITH FREMONT is a tale of this Conquest of California, so valuable and far-reaching in its after results to the United States, written to tell the younger generations something of the men and the events and the surrounding circumstances that made possible the winning of this rich and beautiful country for the Union and to give them a clearer comprehension of how one of the great stones was laid in the massive foundation on which the nation's present greatness has been builded.

The adventures that befell Thure Conroyal all might have happened to a boy living in California

at that time and under similar circumstances. Throughout the story the effort has been made to have all the scenes and all the characters true to the life and to the times. No unwarranted liberties have been taken with the historic scenes and characters depicted. But the history, it is hoped, has been so woven into the thread of the tale itself, that it will not tend in the least to lessen the interests of the story, but, rather, to enhance it by giving to its fiction the similitude of truth. It is also hoped that the story will be of sufficient interest to its young readers to induce them to turn to their histories in order to learn more of these men who helped to build their country's greatness.

No nation can safely forget the debt it owes to its builders.

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Fighting With Fremont

CHAPTER I

THE WILDERNESS MESSENGERS

“**W**HAT do you suppose Captain Fremont would do, Rex, if he should hear that war had broken out between the United States and Mexico?” and Thure Conroyal looked up from the rifle he was cleaning into the face of his cousin, Rex Holt, who, seated on a log near by, was sharpening his hunting-knife on his whetstone, his sun-bronzed face glowing in the ruddy light of the camp-fire.

“Do!” and the blue eyes flashed like rapier points in the direction of his young cousin. “He’d whirl about and start back for California on the double-quick. You don’t suppose he’d leave the Americans in California unprotected, or let such a splendid country be gobbled up by the English or the French, without giving his American rifles a chance to speak a word, do you? Not by the Eternal Andrew Jackson! Fremont is not that kind of an American. California is about ripe to drop from the old Mexican tree anyhow; and, if war should shake her loose, he’ll see that she drops into the arms of Uncle Sam, where she belongs, and not

into the outstretched apron of good old Mother England. I reckon," and he lowered his voice and glanced knowingly around the little circle of men gathered about the glowing camp-fire, "exploring is not the only reason for Fremont's being here. According to all reports, war with Mexico is almost certain; and, I calculate, Fremont has been sent out here so as to be right on the job, when the war breaks out. Leastwise that's how I read the signs. What do you make out of them, Ham?" and he turned to a huge broad-shouldered man, seated on a rock by the side of Thure, meditatively puffing on an old pipe, while his fingers were busy sewing a deerskin patch on the knee of his already well-patched deerskin trousers.

"Wal," and Hammer Jones, the giant addressed as Ham, paused in his sewing and slowly took the pipe from his mouth, "them's 'bout my readin' of th' signs, Rex. It sart'in would be a mortal sin for th' US tew let Johnny Bull git his grip on Calaforny; an' it don't seem reasonable that th' good Lord made sech a beautiful country jest for Mexies an' Ingines tew live in. Anyhow th' country belongs tew us by right of situation; an', I reckon, if thar's goin' tew be any droppin', Fremont's here tew see that she drops right; an', if thar's goin' tew be any fitin', he'll sure see that we gits intew th' scrimmage. By th' long-eared Ananias, I'd like tew see Uncle Sam wallop th' Mexies out of their dirty blankets!" and he brought one of his great hands

down with a resounding slap on his broad knee.

"So would I," and Thure Conroyal half jumped to his feet in boyish enthusiasm, his eyes glowing, "because then California would be almost sure to become a part of the United States; and it would seem good to live under the old flag again; and I know that half of the Californians would be glad of the change. They don't like the Mexicans much more than we Americans do. But," and his young face clouded, "I don't see how Fremont or anybody else way up here in Oregon, hundreds of miles from any white settlement, would know it, even if war should break out between the United States and Mexico. Why, Mexico and the United States might be fighting even now for all we know!" he concluded a bit dramatically, dropping back on the rock by the side of Ham.¹

"So they might be, but I reckon they ain't," Hammer Jones said, again picking up his needle and resuming his patching, "or we wouldn't be here. Fremont's got mighty sharp ears, an' news, somehow, travels powerful fast, even in th' wilderness. Now I'll bet a hoss ag'in a chaw of terbacker that th' Captain is a-thinkin' of this same problem

¹Thure was right. Hostilities between the United States and Mexico had already begun. About noon on this very day, May 8, 1846, General Taylor had fought and won the battle of Palo Alto, the first battle of the war; but, of course, Fremont and his men, at that time in the wilderness of Oregon, could have no knowledge of this fact, as they gathered around their camp-fires that night on the shores of Lake Klamath.

right now," and he turned his eyes to where a tall, spare, active-looking man was standing alone by the side of his camp-fire, staring down moodily into the ruddy coals. "Leastwise he looks as if he was a-doin' a lot of powerful hard thinkin' 'bout some-thin'. He's been a-standin' thar a-lookin' down intew that fire for the last hour, without so much as winking an eye."

"He certainly does look as if he was thinking some," agreed Rex, turning his eyes in the direction of the solitary figure standing by the lonely camp-fire. "And he has acted uneasy like ever since we left the Sacramento Valley, as if he wasn't half satisfied with himself for ever getting out of California, even if Castro did threaten to shove him out on the points of his bayonets."

"Mighty lucky for Castro that he didn't try that bayonet-shovin' game," growled Ham. "We'd—"

He stopped abruptly and his hand quickly dropped the needle and swiftly caught up the rifle that lay close by his side.

"I swun, what in nater is comin' now, Kit?" and his eyes turned questioningly to Kit Carson, a small compactly-built man, who, already alert, was standing, his rifle held ready in his hands, bending forward and listening intently.

"Horses," answered Kit Carson, a look of relief passing over his rugged face; "and with white men on their backs," and he straightened up and stood quietly resting on the long barrel of his rifle, his

keen gray eyes searching the darkness of the surrounding night in the direction of the sound of horses' feet that now could be plainly heard approaching the camp.

By this time all of the little company were on their feet, their eyes turned anxiously in the direction of the advancing sound, wondering greatly who could be thus approaching their camp out of the darkness and the wilderness, where only hostile Indians and wild beasts lived. They knew that it could be no enemy. The cracking limbs and the sounds of the horses' hoofs, as they stumbled over the rough ground in the darkness, told them this; for no enemy would think of approaching an armed camp thus noisily. And yet, what friends could be seeking them in the depths of this wilderness? and why? For a couple of minutes all stood, tense with excitement, awaiting they knew not what; and then two dark figures emerged from the surrounding blackness and moved slowly into the circle of the firelight.

"Wal, I'll be durned, if 'tain't hosses and white men!" ejaculated Ham. "Two on 'em, an' lookin' 'bout tuckered. Now, who can they be?"

"Neal and Seigler!" yelled Kit Carson, suddenly hurrying toward the two men. "Captain, it's Sam Neal and Seigler from Sutter's Fort," he called to Fremont, who still stood by the camp-fire, his eyes turned eagerly in the direction of the advancing horsemen.

"Bring them to me at once, Carson," Fremont replied. "They must bring news from the States," and his face lighted up and his eyes sparkled, as he thought of what that news might be.

"Is this Captain Fremont's camp?" called one of the horsemen, the moment they came within the circle of the firelight.

"Yes," answered a dozen voices.

"Thank God! Take us to Fremont at once," and the men tumbled wearily out of their saddles. "We've been trailing you as fast as horse legs could take us. Must have come a hundred miles the last two days; and I reckon our horses are plumb tuckered. Now, where's Fremont? we've a message for him that can't wait."

"Here I am," and Captain Fremont, whose anxiety had not permitted him to await the coming of the men to him, pushed his way through the crowd that now surrounded the two weary men and their weary horses and, gripping a hand of each, shook it heartily. "Now, Sam," and he turned to Samuel Neal, "your message."

"Lieutenant Gillespie, of the United States Navy, with a small party of men, is back there," and Sam Neal jerked his thumb over his shoulder and pointed into the darkness whence he had just come. "He has orders to find you wherever you may be; and we've been following hard on your trail for more than a week. But, the Indians getting too threatening for so small a party to feel safe in this wilder-

ness, Lieutenant Gillespie mounted Seigler and me on two of his best horses yesterday morning and ordered us to hit the trail after you as fast as horse legs could take us and let you know of his danger. I reckon, Captain, if you take the back trail right quick, you'll be in time to save Lieutenant Gillespie and his men; but there'll be no time for loitering along the way. The Klamaths were hanging round his little party, like a pack of wolves round a lone buffalo bull, and there's bound to be a killing soon. Don't know what the Lieutenant's message is, but it must be mighty important to send him trailing after you through this wilderness."

"We will start on the back trail at dawn," Fremont declared, the lines on his bronzed face tightening, "and there will be no loitering. Carson," and, in his quick decisive way, he turned to Kit Carson—the little gray-eyed man was his chief of scouts and guides, "have everything ready for us to start as soon as it is light enough for us to see. I'll take you and Basil Lajeunesse, Hammer Jones, Rex Holt and his young cousin, Dick Owens, Godey, and four of the Delawares, and hurry on ahead. See that we have the best and freshest horses in the troop. Now get into your blankets. You will need all the rest you can get, for to-morrow will be a hard day for all of you. See that the guards are properly posted for the night, Lieutenant Peck. Good night," and Captain Fremont, a light glowing in his dark eyes that was not there before the

coming of the two men, returned to the camp-fire burning in front of his tent.

For a few minutes after the departure of their commander, the men lingered around their camp-fires to talk over the coming of Neal and Seigler and to speculate on what the message borne by Lieutenant Gillespie might portend; and then, rolling themselves up in their blankets, their saddles for their pillows, their rifles by their sides to keep them dry and to have them handy in case of need, they stretched themselves out on the ground and were soon sleeping soundly.

"I am glad that we are to go on ahead with Captain Fremont and Kit Carson," Thure Conroyal said, as he lay down by the side of Rex. "You know I have never seen Kit Carson in an Indian fight, but I've heard so much about his skill and bravery and his always knowing just what to do no matter how great the danger, that I'd give almost anything to see him in an Indian fight, and now it looks as if we might have that fight. Oh, but wouldn't it be terrible if we should get to Lieutenant Gillespie too late and find that the Indians had killed him and his men?" and Thure shuddered at the awful sight his vivid imagination conjured up. "But, if we did," and his young lips came together grimly, "Kit Carson and Fremont would make the Indians who did it wish they had never seen Lieutenant Gillespie, wouldn't they, Rex?"

"Yes, and every man of us would help them, so

long as there was a charge of powder in a horn or a knife in a belt," answered Rex, glowering fiercely out into the surrounding darkness. "Them Klamaths have been hunting trouble for a long time, and now it begins to look as if they were a-going to get all they want. They sure will if they have killed Lieutenant Gillespie, and Fremont and Kit Carson get after them. I never had much use for a Klamath anyhow. They have been a constant menace ever since we settled in the Sacramento Valley; and 'twould do them a powerful lot of good to teach them a lesson with powder and bullets that they wouldn't forget right away; and Fremont's got the men with him who can do it. There are no better Indian fighters in the Rockies than Kit Carson, Dick Owens, Godey and Basil Lajeunesse, and they've got the right sort of men to back them up."

"That's right. Every word on it is right; but jest plug up that word-spouter," growled Ham, who had already rolled himself up in his blanket on the other side of Thure, "or I'll jam my blanket down it. It's sleep we're needin' now more'n word-spoutin', if we're tew be up tew-morrer afore sunrise."

"Stop your growling then, you old bear," and Rex flung a boot at Ham's head. "I'll be to sleep now before you," and he rolled over in his blanket and was soon snoring in unison with Ham.

But sleep did not come as easily to Thure's young

eyes. He was only fifteen years old, and this was his first venture into the depths of the wilderness, and it was not to be expected that he would be as indifferent to the wild life he was now living as were these hardy men, to whom an Indian fight was one of the commonplaces of their adventurous lives.

For a long time, indeed ever since his father had moved his household goods and gods from New Orleans to California, five years before, via the Isthmus of Panama, and had settled down on a large ranch in the beautiful Valley of the Sacramento, where he now lived with his herds and flocks like one of the patriarchs of old, Thure had longed to go hunting and trapping in the mountains, as his father had hunted and trapped in his early manhood, had longed to go out into the mystery of the wilderness and hunt the grizzly bear and the deer and trap the beaver and fight the Indian and learn the craft of the woods and see the grandeur and the beauty of the mountains and the forests and the plains, even as his older brother, Dill, had done until he was married two years ago and had settled down on his father's ranch, and as his cousin, Rex Holt, was still doing. From his earliest childhood his blood had been thrilled and his ambition fired with tales of the men of the rifle and the trap, with stories of the exploits of Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, Jedidiah Smith and the hundreds of other fearless men, who with rifles and traps had defied the Indians and the wild beasts and the inclemency of

the weather and had roamed undaunted and unafraid over the vast wilderness of mountains and plains and forests west of the Missouri River; and always he had hoped, when he grew to manhood to become one of these adventurous men, as a boy will hope and dream of the future.

Then, with the ending of the year 1845, from out this wilderness into the Valley of the Sacramento, had come the explorer, John Charles Fremont, at the head of his band of hardy mountaineers, bronzed, weather-beaten, deerskin-dressed men, armed with long-barreled rifles; and, to Thure's great joy, with them had come his cousin, Rex Holt, now one of Fremont's most valued men. This was his opportunity; and, with all of a boy's eloquence, he pleaded with his father for permission to go with Rex, when Fremont again struck northward into the wilderness, after General Castro had refused to allow him and his men to remain in California; and to his great joy his father had offered no serious objections.

"You can go," he said, "if Captain Fremont will give his permission and Rex will take you. The rough life will do you good. It will put grit and courage and self-reliance into you. There is nothing like the wilderness to get all there is in a boy or a man out of him."

"You are too young," Rex at first had objected.

"Why, I am almost as old as you and Dill were when you crossed the Rocky Mountains in search

of Kit Carson and found your father," Thure had replied indignantly. "I am growing on sixteen; and Dill was only sixteen years old and you were but seventeen when you had all those adventures with Captain Tom, shooting grizzly bears and buffaloes and fighting Indians; and I've often heard dad say the experience made men out of both of you; and, I reckon, if that trip was good for you then, this one will be good for me now. You will let me go with you, won't you, Rex?"¹

And Rex had laughed and yielded; and Captain Fremont had at first frowned and then smiled and yielded; and thus it had come about that young Thure Conroyal was with Fremont, when the two messengers from Lieutenant Gillespie rode into his camp in the Oregon wilderness on that May night in the year 1846.

For many minutes after the loud breathing of Rex and Ham told him that they were sound asleep, Thure lay with mind too excited over the sudden coming of the two men from out the darkness of the night and the wilderness, and the message they bore, and Captain Fremont's commands for the morrow for even the exhaustion of his body to bring sleep. The thought of Lieutenant Gillespie's peril—at that very moment the Indians might be attack-

¹ The story of Rex's and Dill's perilous journey with Captain Tom Roberts and his band of trappers, has been already narrated in the first book of this series, entitled "WITH KIT CARSON IN THE ROCKIES."

ing him, of what his message to Fremont might portend—war with Mexico meant war in California, of the swift backward journey on the morrow and its probable Indian fight, so stirred his young and susceptible mind that, although he tried to go to sleep, he could not still his uneasy thoughts and sleep refused to come.

At length Thure partly arose, and, leaning on one elbow, looked out into the silence and mystery of the great wilderness. Above, through the dark branches of the trees, twinkled the eternal stars. There was no moon. Close around him, but scattered at irregular intervals, the camp-fires of Fremont's men glowed ruddily through the darkness, the dim outlines of their sleeping bodies, stretched out in their blankets on the ground, looking like the black logs of trees. A little distance to his right, in the dark shadows of a huge tree, the white tent of the commander showed; and, seated on a log before the fire burning near the tent's entrance, his elbow resting on one knee, his chin in his cupped hand, his eyes staring down into the glowing coals, sleepless, thinking, pondering, planning, sat Fremont. How long he sat thus, Thure never knew, for, presently, awed and subdued and quieted by the mystery and the silence of the wilderness and the night, he sank back on his blanket and soon his eyes had closed in sleep.

CHAPTER II

TWO COLUMNS OF SMOKE

JOHN CHARLES FREMONT at this date, 1846, had already won world-wide renown as an American explorer. In 1842, under the direction of the United States government, he had led his first exploring expedition into the wilds of the then unknown Rocky Mountains, passing through the South Pass and going as far west as the Wind River Mountains. In 1843 the government had again sent him westward to continue his explorations to the Pacific coast. This Second Expedition led him northwestward as far as Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River, and thence, by a wide southerly sweep, into California and down the Sacramento Valley to Sutter's Fort. From Sutter's Fort he went to San Francisco, and from there down the Pacific coast to a point not far from Los Angeles, where he turned northeast and, again crossing the Sierras and the Rocky Mountains, reached civilization. Two years later, in the Autumn of 1845, the authorities at Washington once again started Fremont westward at the head of another exploring expedition, with instructions to discover, if possible, a more southerly route to

the Pacific coast than that through the South Pass, and with certain other private instructions, the exact nature of which are unknown even to this day, concerning the part he was to play in the drama of the Conquest of California, in the event of the impending Mexican war becoming a reality. This was the famous Third Exploring Expedition; and the one with which our heroes are directly concerned.

Sixty men, nearly all of them old hunters and trappers skilled in the perils and inured to the hardships of the mountains and the plains, made up the personnel of this expedition. First among these veterans of the rifle and the trap was Kit Carson, then in the prime of his life and famous throughout all the West for his wonderful skill with his rifle, his dauntless courage and pluck, his remarkable knowledge of the pathways through the mountains and over the plains, and, above all, for the cool courage and alert quickness of mind and body that made him one of the most successful Indian fighters that the West has known—and yet, Kit Carson was a small, quiet-appearing man who never uttered a boastful word! Then there were Alexis Godey, Richard Owens, Fitzpatrick, Basil Lajeunesse, all famous hunters and Indian fighters, and many others like Hammer Jones and Rex Holt, who, although not so well known to fame, were yet as brave and as skilful as any. Altogether it would have been difficult to have found sixty men any-

where that would have been better able to take care of themselves under any circumstance that they were likely to meet on the plains or in the mountains than were these men of Fremont—rough, deerskin-clothed, weather-beaten, stalwart sons of the untamed West.

Another member of the party must not be forgotten. This was Jacob Dodson, a negro, who had been with Fremont on his Second Expedition, and who firmly believed that "Massah Fremont could no mo' git er long without dis nigger to 'tend to his pusnel comforts than could a lil chick without de ma-hen." He was tall and lank in frame, with a long narrow head, crowned with kinky black wool, an enormous mouth, guarded by a set of ivories that shone like rows of white tombstones in the mouth of a dark cave when he grinned, and huge ears that stuck out on each side of his head like opened barn doors. The skin on his face was abnormally loose and, when he laughed or became excited, ludicrous grimaces chased one another all over his chocolate-colored countenance. Possibly it was for these reasons that the men all called him Beauty—Beaut, for short—when they did not call him anything worse. In addition to all these entrancing qualifications the negro was good-natured, willing and as "funny as a circus"; and there was not a man in all the company from Fremont down who did not consider Beaut one of the "best niggers that ever shoveled grub."

This Third Exploring Expedition, after many hardships and perils, had reached Sutter's Fort in California in December, 1845; and had remained in California until the trouble with General Castro arose. Castro accused the Americans of being highwaymen and freebooters, and ordered them forthwith out of the country under penalty of being driven out by force of arms. Naturally Fremont and his bold mountaineers did not like the tone of this order, and they refused to go until they got ready to go. General Castro at once gathered a force of Mexican soldiery and marched against the Americans. Fremont promptly fortified himself on the top of a near-by mountain, and defied Castro to do his worst. For three days he awaited the Mexicans. They came, some three or four hundred strong and with three pieces of artillery; but, when they saw the strong fort of logs which had been built on the top of the mountain and thought of the sixty deadly rifles behind it, they concluded that the Americans were not such bad fellows after all, if let alone, and made no move to attack. On the third day Fremont, not wishing to involve the United States in trouble with Mexico unless obliged to do so, withdrew slowly and growlingly northward up the valley to Sutter's Fort, where Thure Conroyal had joined him. He remained at Sutter's Fort for a week; and then, wishing to explore the regions about Lake Klamath and the Columbia River, he

had started northward for the Oregon wilderness; and it was there, on the shores of Lake Klamath, that the two messengers from Lieutenant Gillespie had found him, when their advent out of the darkness and the wilderness had awakened so much anxiety and interest in the camp of our friends.

When Thure awoke the next morning, he found himself sprawling on the ground with the grinning face of Hammer Jones bending over him, one end of the blanket from which he had been so unceremoniously dumped still in the hands of his big friend.

"First call for breakfast," grinned Ham. "An' thar won't be no second call. Lively, now," and, suddenly reaching down, he caught Thure by the shoulders with both huge hands, jerked him to his feet and shook him until Thure feared he might shake the teeth out of his jaws. "Best way I know on for wakin' boys," Ham continued cheerfully, depositing Thure on a log near the camp-fire. "Never knowed it tew fail. Seems tew git right after sleep an' shake it plumb out of a feller, like a terrier shakin' th' life out of a rat, now don't it, Thure?" and Ham grinned quizzically down into the boy's face.

"You bet; but don't tell dad about it," Thure laughed. "When do we start?" and his eyes turned eagerly to the face of Ham.

"Jest as soon as we git outside our feed. Kit's got th' hosses ready, an' th' Captain's given orders

for everybody tew be ready tew mount in half an hour. We're all mighty anxious tew git tew Lieutenant Gillespie afore them durned Klamaths gits his scalp, so, I reckon, we'll do some powerful fast ridin' when we git started."

"Oh, I do hope we will be in time!"

"I reckon we will, if hoss flesh can git us thar. 'Tain't Kit Carson's way tew loiter none, when he's after Ingines. Now git busy with that bear steak and coffee," and Ham pointed to a huge chunk of bear meat that was roasting over the coals.

During this short conversation Thure had been getting into the few clothes he had taken off for the night and now he was dressed and, after a dash of cold water from the lake over his face and hands, he was ready to tackle the steak, with an appetite that needed none of the condiments of civilization to sharpen it.

The little wilderness encampment now presented a busy and a strikingly picturesque scene. The sun had not yet risen, and a dozen camp-fires glowed ruddily through the darkness of the early morning. About them moved the picturesque figures of the deerskin-clothed men, packing the camp equipment, saddling the horses, cooking, eating, shouting, laughing, even singing or attempting to sing in the very exuberance of their joyous animal spirits; and yet there was no confusion. Each had his particular work to do and did it

promptly and effectively, like trained soldiers, which in a sense they were, for Fremont always held his men under strict military discipline.

Before the half hour was up all were ready for the start. Captain Fremont gave his last orders to the officer left in charge of the main part of the command, which was to follow as swiftly as possible the little company of men hurrying to the aid of Lieutenant Gillespie; and then, springing on the back of Sacramento, his favorite horse, he placed himself at the head of the rescuing party, and, at the word of command and with the cheers of their comrades left behind shouting encouragement in their ears, the little cavalcade galloped off, just as the first rays of the morning sun glistened on the distant tops of the eastern mountains.

Every man of them was riding light, carrying only his weapons and ammunition. All of the impedimenta had been left behind with the main command. Each was mounted on a horse selected for speed and endurance. No one knew better than did these men the dangers that threatened Lieutenant Gillespie, and the need of haste. They had just passed through the region where he now was, and had witnessed the hostility of the warlike Klamaths. Only their numbers had protected them from open attack. The small party of Lieutenant Gillespie could not hope to long escape the vengeful wrath of the Klamaths, who resented bitterly the coming of the white man into their hunting-

grounds. Every moment of time was precious. A half hour, a minute, might measure the difference between life and a horrible death. No, there would be no loitering on this backward rush to the rescue of Lieutenant Gillespie.

Captain Fremont and Kit Carson rode at the head and set the pace. At their right and at their left, silent and watchful, rode two of the Delaware Indians. Behind them came Rex and Ham, with Thure between them. Dick Owens and the others followed. Their keen eyes found no difficulty in following the back trail, and where the ground permitted they could ride at full speed. But the way ran through a roadless wilderness of mountains and forests and valleys, and they were frequently compelled by its roughness to walk their horses. Then the men swore under their breaths and the anxious look in their eyes deepened and their lips tightened grimly. At noon they paused on the banks of a little stream of water for thirty minutes, to rest their horses and eat their frugal meal; and then on again.

"Do you think we will find Lieutenant Gillespie to-day?" Thure asked, late in the afternoon.

"I hope so," Rex replied, glancing anxiously to where the sun was already nearing the tops of the western mountains. "According to Neal and Seigler they ought to camp somewhere nigh Squaw Lake to-night, and we ought to make Squaw Lake before it gets too dark to see our way, if—"

At that moment the leaders of the little cavalcade stopped abruptly, their eyes all turned to the distant south, where a thin column of black smoke rose in sudden wavering puffs from the rounded top of a mountain five or more miles away. A couple of minutes later an answering smoke-column appeared, rising from the top of a mountain across the valley from where the first column was seen.

No one spoke. All sat motionless on the backs of their horses, their eyes intent on the columns of smoke until the last puff had vanished in the air. Then all turned anxious faces to where Kit Carson sat, as to the man best able to interpret those threatening smoke signals; for this was the Indian way of telegraphing the approach of an enemy or of summoning distant bands, and the signals might mean that their coming had been discovered or that distant bands were being called together, possibly to attack Lieutenant Gillespie.

"Do you think they have discovered us?" and Fremont turned quickly to Kit Carson.

"No," answered Carson. "It's more likely that they are calling in some distant bands of warriors. What do you say, Dick?" and he turned to Dick Owens.

"I say, let's be gettin' on our way. The sooner we find Lieutenant Gillespie, the more comfortable I'll feel. Them signals don't concern us as much as they do him."

"Dick is right, Captain," Carson spoke decisively.

"We must make the most of every moment of daylight; for, if we do not find Lieutenant Gillespie to-night, I fear we will never find him alive."

"We will find him to-night, if it takes all night. Forward!" and the lips of Captain Fremont tightened grimly, as he struck the spurs into the flanks of Sacramento and led the way in a swift gallop over a stretch of level valley.

The scenery through which they were now traveling was grand, was really worthy of the use of that much abused word, sublime. On either side of the valley towered huge mountains, their tops night-capped with snow. Great walls and buttresses and castellated piles of barren rocks reared their frowning heights on every side, save where the level of the valley lay smiling with verdure. Like a string of pearly beads a rivulet flowed over the bosom of the valley, its sparkling waters hidden here and there by little groves of trees. God had thought big and beautiful thoughts when He piled up these mountains and leveled the valleys and carved out ways for the rushing waters.

But our anxious friends could give no thought to the beauties of the scene. Their eyes must be ever on the search for lurking savages, their hands ever ready to defend their lives. The castellated piles and walls and buttresses of rock were interesting to them only as possible ambuscading-places for their wily foes. Any moment the horrifying war-whoop might chill their blood. They had no time to throw

out scouts in advance to investigate. They must take their chances, depending solely on their wonderfully trained senses to warn them of danger before it was too late to ward it off.

For an hour longer they traveled on, as swiftly as the roughness of the way would allow. Then the shadows of night began to gather thickly in the valleys and they were compelled to walk their horses; but still they pressed on. Soon it became so dark that Kit Carson and one of the Delaware Indians dismounted, and, leading their horses, literally felt their way, the others falling in line close behind them. Suddenly, Carson and the Indian stopped, Carson holding up his hand for silence.

A faint sound, differing from the natural sounds of the mountains and the night, had reached their keen ears.

"What is it?" whispered Thure, his voice trembling a little in spite of his utmost efforts.

"Sh-h-!" and Rex held up a warning hand.

Again, faint but distinct, came the sound through the stillness of the night.

"It's a camp; but I can't tell whether it's Whites or Indians, so I reckon the Delaware and I had better find out. Stay right where you are until we get back; and keep as still as the Lord will let you," and Kit Carson passed his bridle rein to Rex; and the next moment he and the Delaware had vanished so silently into the darkness that Thure could not hear the slightest sound of their going.

A half hour passed—a long half hour to the waiting men, sitting there in the darkness and the silence of the wilderness, every nerve tense with excitement and hope; and then, so suddenly and quietly that even Fremont started, Kit Carson stood by his side.

“It’s the camp of Lieutenant Gillespie, Captain,” he reported quietly, yet loud enough for all to hear.

“Thank God!” Fremont breathed fervently.

“Quiet!” and Carson held up a warning hand as something almost like a cheer burst from the lips of the men. “The surrounding mountains may be full of listening ears. Fall in quietly behind me and I will lead you to his camp. It is in a little grove of trees about twenty rods from the shores of Squaw Lake,” and, taking the bridle rein of his horse from Rex, he led the way.

“Oh, but I am glad, glad that we reached Lieutenant Gillespie in time!” and Thure’s voice trembled so with emotions that he fain would have given vent to in shouts of joy. “Now we will hear from the States. Now we will know whether or not war with Mexico has begun.”

“Hush!” and Rex glanced admonishingly to where Captain Fremont sat silent and thoughtful on his horse, his tall form dimly outlined in the darkness. “I reckon we’re all mighty glad to find Lieutenant Gillespie safe, and mighty anxious to know why he has come so far to find Fremont, but

now mum is the word until we are in Lieutenant Gillespie's camp."

For some ten or fifteen minutes the little cavalcade followed the leadership of Kit Carson through the darkness, no one speaking a word but all straining their eyes to catch the first glimpse of the friendly glow of the camp-fire of Lieutenant Gillespie; and then Thure heard off to his right the sound of water softly lapping the confining shores and saw dimly through the encircling trees the dark surface of a small body of water.

"Squaw Lake," Rex whispered and nodded in the direction of the water. "I reckoned we'd find Lieutenant Gillespie camped somewhere near here, since it's the only place within ten miles where there's plenty of water."

For some five minutes they journeyed near the shores of the lake, then Kit Carson turned abruptly to the left, and a couple of minutes later they caught sight of the welcomed glow of a camp-fire shining through the trees.

"Halt!" called a sentry; and then, as he saw who it was, "Fremont!" he yelled joyously.

The little group of men seated around the camp-fire leaped to their feet and hurried forward to meet them; and soon Captain Fremont was gripping the hand of Lieutenant Gillespie.

CHAPTER III

THE HOOT OF AN OWL

THURE CONROYAL'S bones were not made out of iron, nor were his flesh and muscles composed of red india-rubber; so that, when he dismounted from his horse in the camp of Lieutenant Gillespie after that long day's ride—well, he was so completely tuckered out that he could hardly stand, but, pluckily, he kept, or tried to keep, all his feelings of weariness to himself. He did not want these hardened men, tough as the gnarled oaks of their own forests, to imagine that a little jaunt like that could tire him out, even if he was only a boy. But the kindly eyes of Hammer Jones caught sight of his tired face in the fire-light, as he bent to loosen his saddle-cinch.

"You jest squat down on that log aside th' fire. I'll tend tew your hoss," and the big fellow laid a sympathetic hand on Thure's shoulder. "It's been a powerful tiresome ride, an', I reckon, all on us are 'bout tuckered; but you've stood it like a little major," and the great hand gave him a kindly shove toward the log.

"But, I'm not tuckered," Thure affirmed indig-

nantly. "Just a little saddle-worn. I can take care of my own horse."

"Of course you can," grinned Ham. "But that chunk of venison spitted over th' fire can't turn itself, an', if you don't turn it, I reckon nobody else will, seein' everybody but me's tew excited tew think of their stumicks. Thar, can't you see she's smokin'! An' me hungry enough tew chaw horse hair! Quick!" and he gave Thure a vigorous push toward the fire, over which a huge chunk of meat, spitted on a long sharpened stick, was roasting. "You keep that grub from burnin' an' I'll 'tend tew th' hosses."

"All right; but I'm not tuckered, Ham—that is not completely," and Thure stumbled over to the log, sat down and, seizing hold of the end of the stick that was thrust into the ground, turned it so that the opposite side of the meat was exposed to the heat of the fire.

From where he sat he could see Captain Fremont and Lieutenant Gillespie; and, for the moment, he even forgot his weariness in his anxiety to learn something of what had sent Lieutenant Gillespie so far into the wilderness to find Captain Fremont. The two officers, the moment the greetings were over, had stepped apart from all the others and now stood close together, talking in low voices, on the opposite side of the camp-fire from where Thure sat. The faces of both showed great excitement and their gestures were emphatic and

decisive and occasionally their voices were raised sufficiently for Thure to catch a few words. Presently Fremont, his eyes kindling and his dark face flushing in the light of the camp-fire, said so loudly that Thure could hear every word distinctly: "I understand, Lieutenant Gillespie; and I will do all that I can to see that the hopes of the President and the Secretary are realized. Now, give me my letters and papers. It has been eleven months since I have heard a word from wife and home," and a wistful longing look came into the eyes of Fremont.

The two men now moved over to where Lieutenant Gillespie's saddle lay, and from the saddlebags the lieutenant took a bundle of letters and a package of papers and handed them to Fremont. Fremont then returned to the fire, and, seating himself on a log, began eagerly reading the letters and examining the papers.

In the meantime the tired horses had been unsaddled and safely picketed, and the men, having built two other camp-fires, gathered around them, and soon the coffee pots were boiling and the air fragrant with the savory odors of roasting meats.

"Wal, son, how's that meat?" and Ham, reaching down over Thure's shoulder, seized the spit on which the meat was roasting and examined the hot chunk of venison with critical eyes. "Done tew a turn an' smellin' fit tew make a king's mouth water. Come; we're tew mess with Kit an' Rex an' Dick an' Godey," and, carrying the meat, still fastened to

the stick, in his hand, he led the way to one of the camp-fires around which were gathered Kit Carson, Rex Holt and a number of other deerskin-clothed men.

All the men had journeyed far that day and all were very tired, too tired and sleepy to sit long by the camp-fire and talk, while, as for Thure, now that the excitement was over and his stomach full of food, he could scarcely keep his eyes open.

"Better get to sleep, Thure," Kit Carson said, noticing the boy's nodding head; "and so had all of us. At least that is what I am going to do just as soon as I get my rifle cleaned," and, picking up his rifle, he began at once cleaning it with all the loving care a man bestows upon his most valued treasure.

Some of the other men followed his example and began cleaning their rifles; and Thure gladly took his advice and rolling his tired form up in a blanket near the fire, for the night was cold, was sound asleep almost as soon as he closed his eyes.

No one, not even Kit Carson, thought that the Indians would dare to attack them now that there were sixteen armed men in the camp, and all were worn-out with the day's hard ride; consequently, for the first and only time when in the Indian country, Fremont suffered his vigilance and discipline to relax, and required no guards to be stationed that night. He himself expected to sit up late, reading his letters and papers and pondering over them, and would keep a watchful eye over his tired and sleep-

ing men. Therefore, when their rifles were cleaned and their pipes smoked, all the men rolled themselves up in their blankets around the fires and soon were sleeping, as only those who live the outdoor life as they were living it can sleep.

Kit Carson was one of the last men to lie down. While cleaning his rifle he had broken the cap-tube and had spent considerable time vainly trying to fix it. He did not wish to go to sleep with a useless gun by his side.

"Shucks, let her go till mornin', Kit," at last Ham had impatiently advised from his blanket. "Thar ain't spunk enough in all the Ingines in these mountains tew attack sixteen armed white men, sech as we be, even at night, so, I reckon, you won't be needin' th' gun afore then, an' I can't sleep with your tinkerin' soundin' in my ears."

"I can always sleep more comfortable-like, when I know there is a loaded rifle by my side, even if there is no danger," Carson replied. "And you can't always count on just what Indians will do; but, I reckon, we're safe enough for the night, so I'll wait to fix the gun till morning," and he laid the rifle down and prepared his bed.

"Poor little fellow!" he thought, as he glanced to where Thure lay sound asleep. "'Twas a mighty hard ride for muscles as young as yours to stand, and, I reckon, you are plumb tired out; but you've got real pluck, the real Conroyal pluck. Never a grunt nor a growl from your lips all day. Well,

you may need it before long," he continued musingly, as he spread out his blanket on the ground; "for, unless I misread the signs, there's going to be trouble in California soon. I know that look on Fremont's face," and he turned his eyes to where Fremont still sat pondering over his letters and papers by the bright light of his camp-fire, "and it means that he is planning how to work out some difficult problem that'll take a lot of grit and thinking to master. But I'll trust the Captain to work it out right, now that Lieutenant Gillespie has given him the key, which, I take it, was the reason why he was so anxious to find him," and, with a final swift glance around the sleeping encampment, to assure himself that everything was all right, Kit Carson wrapped himself up in his blanket and lay down by the side of Ham.

All in the camp were now asleep but Fremont, who still sat on the log by the fire, reading his letters and papers, doubtless thinking of home and dear ones and the troubled future that loomed dark and threatening before him. Hour after hour passed and still he sat there, a subject for a poet, a picture for an artist, with the ruddy light of the camp-fire playing upon his face and form, solitary in the midst of the encircling gloom and mystery of the night and the wilderness. The camp-fires of his men burnt low, until they were but beds of glowing coals, his own he kept bright by constant replenishings. But, at last, even his tireless soul



ALL IN THE CAMP, SAVE FREMONT, WERE NOW ASLEEP

yielded to the weariness of his mind and body, and gathering up his precious letters and papers, he stood for a moment silently contemplating the peaceful scene of his sleeping camp; and then he, too, spread out his blanket on the ground, wrapped himself up in it and lay down.

For some reason, in spite of his weariness, or, possibly, because of it, Thure Conroyal's sleep was broken and restless. Once, long after midnight, the hoot of an owl, sounding weirdly from the depths of the surrounding darkness, awoke him. He partly arose and, leaning on one hand, looked around. All was still in the camp. The fires looked like huge red eyes, glaring out of the blackness. He saw, or thought he saw, a shadowy something glide from near one of the red eyes and vanish swiftly into the darkness. Again he heard the hoot of an owl, sounding low and warningly; and, for a moment, he shuddered apprehensively and wondered if he had not better awaken Kit Carson or one of the men and tell him what he had seen and heard. But, what had he seen and heard? —a shadow and the hoot of an owl! Surely Kit Carson would laugh at him! Might think that he was afraid! No, he would not awaken anyone. He would watch and listen for a few minutes; and then, if he heard or saw nothing more suspicious, he would lie down again.

For ten minutes Thure sat, leaning on his hand, looking and listening. Only the natural sounds of

the night and the wilderness broke the silence. The camp-fires had burned so low that they gave but little light now. He could scarcely distinguish the outlines of the forms of Basil Lajeunesse and the Delaware Indians, who lay stretched out on the ground on the opposite side of the fire. Not a suspicious movement, not a suspicious sound anywhere.

"Silly, scart by a shadow! It's lucky for you that you did not awaken Kit Carson," and, with this consoling thought, Thure sank back on his blanket and closed his eyes.

For a long time he could not go to sleep. Then, just as his thoughts began wandering in the borders of dreamland, he heard a queer sound, like the "chuck" of an ax striking into something soft. Drowsily he wondered what the sound was—wondered if he had really heard it or had just dreamed it. Again came the strange sound—this time sounding nearer and more distinct. Surely that was no dream! With a violent start he opened his eyes, and saw something dark and terrible leaning over him. At the same moment he heard Kit Carson call out to Basil Lajeunesse on the other side of the camp-fire: "What's the matter there? What's the fuss about?" and then he saw something bright, that glistened in the firelight, descending swiftly toward his head, and, involuntarily, jerked his head and shoulders violently to one side, just in time to avoid the blade of a toma-

hawk that buried itself in the wood of his saddle-tree at the exact spot where his head had been. Before the blow could be repeated, "Indians! Indians!" rang out the startled cries of Kit Carson and Dick Owens; and every man in camp leaped to his feet—all except two, who lay still. They would never move again.

Thure never knew how he got on his feet. The first thing he did know his rifle was to his shoulder and he was firing blindly at a tall Klamath chief, who, at the head of his followers, was charging the four Delaware Indians, whom the cries of Carson and Owens had awakened. His ball missed the chief. He saw one of the Delawares catch up a gun, as he leaped to his feet, and attempt to fire it; but, unfortunately, it was unloaded. He saw an arrow strike the breast of the Delaware; but still the brave fellow fought on, threatening with his empty gun. In another instant a dozen arrows had struck the Delaware, and he went down, with three arrows in his heart. Then with a rush Carson and Fremont and the others sprang to the aid of the Delawares. Carson pulled a pistol from his belt—you will remember that his rifle was useless, and fired at the chief. But, so swiftly did the Klamath dodge, that the ball only cut the string that held the tomahawk to its red owner's arm, and the chief continued to shoot his deadly arrows. Dick Owens fired and struck him in the leg; and then, just as the brave fellow was

turning to run, a ball from Hammer Jones' rifle passed through his heart and he tumbled headlong to the ground. At the fall of their chief the remaining Klamaths lost heart, and swiftly vanished in every direction into the darkness, before the bullets of the now thoroughly aroused mountaineers could do further execution.

Basil Lajeunesse lay dead, killed instantly while he slept by the blow of a tomahawk on his head; and by his side lay one of the Delaware Indians, slain in the same manner. This, with the other Delaware killed while fighting so bravely, made three men dead by the axes and arrows of the Klamaths, while an arrow had wounded one of the other Delawares. Of the Klamaths, the brave chief shot by Hammer Jones alone lay dead. All the others had escaped unhurt; and it was a very sad and a very wrathful group of men that gathered around the dead bodies of the two Delawares and the still form of brave Basil Lajeunesse, who had been with Fremont on his two other exploring expeditions and was one of his most trusted men.

"Durned if I don't feel like wipin' off the earth every treacherous Klamath that breathes," Hammer Jones muttered savagely, as his eyes rested on the bloody form of the man who had been his good comrade through so many hardships and perils. "He always stood by a comrade, an' was brave an' honest, an' I never knowed him tew shirk no duty or tew act low down an' mean tew a fellow human.

Wal, he's dead; an' 'tain't no use of sayin' nuthin'," and, with a gloomy shake of his head, Ham turned away, having pronounced in his homely words a most fitting eulogy of the dead mountaineer.

The Klamath chief lay where he had fallen, a fine stalwart-looking fellow even in death. Forty arrows were still in his quiver, the most beautiful and warlike arrows that even Kit Carson had ever seen. He must have been one of the bravest of the Klamath chiefs, judging from his dress and his heroic death. Even his white enemies admired the courage he had shown. The blade of the tomahawk that lay near where he had fallen was stained red with blood; and, doubtless, it was his hand that had struck the fatal blows in the darkness and silence of the sleeping camp.

"He was as brave an Indian as I ever saw," Kit Carson said, as he stood looking down on the dead body; "and, if his warriors had been equally bold, they would have got us all before we would have been sufficiently awake to defend ourselves," and his face whitened at the horror of the thought of such a massacre.

"Sart'in 'twas a powerful narrer squeeze for all on us; but— Wal, I'll be durned!" and Ham bent quickly over Thure's saddle and, when he straightened up, he held high in his hand an Indian tomahawk that he had found driven deep into the wood of the saddle. "Now, look at that! An' stickin' right in th' spot whar th' boy's head lay! Wal, I'll

be *tee-totally* durned!" and his astounded eyes anxiously sought the face of Thure, as if he could hardly believe the evidences of his own senses. "How did that git thar?"

"I just opened my eyes in time to see the tomahawk ready to strike, and it scart me so that I jumped so quick that my head got out of the way before it hit; and then Kit Carson began yelling Indians, and the Indian got so frightened that he didn't stop to pull out his tomahawk. I want to keep that tomahawk to show dad and Dill," and Thure reached out his hand for the weapon.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" ejaculated Ham for the third time, as he handed the boy the tomahawk. "You sart'in are your dad's own son!"

No attempt was made to follow the Klamaths. It would have been impossible in the darkness. But you may be sure that a guard was stationed; and every man lay with his rifle cocked, expecting another attack, until morning. They were not the kind of men to be caught twice in the same kind of a trap.

CHAPTER IV

A WILDERNESS BURIAL

THE night passed with no further trouble from the Klamaths. Evidently they had not learned of the coming of Fremont and his men and had expected to find only Lieutenant Gillespie and his small party sleeping around the camp-fires; and, probably, the result of the attack was almost as great a surprise to them as it was to our friends. At any rate not a sign nor a sound was seen nor heard of them again that night.

There was gloom and sadness on every face, when, in the gray dawn of the early morning, they began to prepare to leave that odious and blood-stained spot; and in each heart was the determination to punish, if possible, the treacherous savages. Theirs was the stern creed of the mountains and the plains, the rough law of the wilderness, where human life could only be protected and rendered safe by bringing swift and certain punishment upon all who violated its sanctity. Then, too, some of these same Indians had been in Fremont's camp only a few days before, hungry and asking for food; and, although he had had but two days' meat on hand, with the prospect of soon being obliged

to eat mule meat, he had divided with them and had even had a mule unpacked to give them some tobacco and knives; and the remembrance of this added fuel to their anger. Indeed, so intense was this feeling that punishment must be meted out to the Klamaths, that even the importance of the mission of Lieutenant Gillespie was partly forgotten for the moment.

"Do you think Kit Carson and Captain Fremont are planning to punish the Klamaths?" Thure asked, as he and Rex sat down to their hastily prepared breakfast. "I heard Kit Carson say that he did not think there were more than fifteen or twenty Indians in the attack last night, and we got their chief. It don't seem like what I've heard of Kit Carson to let a thing like that," and Thure glanced to where the three dead bodies lay side by side, covered with a blanket, "go unpunished."

"No, it is not like Kit Carson, and it is not like Fremont, and it is not like any one of us to let the death of Basil Lajeunesse, to say nothing of the two Delawares, go unpunished," and a glint of savagery came into the blue eyes of Rex. "But we must first get back to the main body; and then you will see whether or not Fremont and Carson have forgotten what happened last night. You'll find we'll take the back trail at once."

Rex was right; for, before he and Thure had finished their breakfast, the order came for all to

saddle up and be prepared to start back along the trail at once.

"We are going to get back to the main body as soon as we can," Kit Carson said; "and then, after we've buried our dead, the Captain has promised that we can attend to the Klamaths."

Accordingly, the three bodies were tied on the backs of mules, and the start back along the trail begun as promptly as possible.

Fremont did not wish to bury the dead until all were present; but, after having gone some ten miles and finding it impossible to get the bodies through the thick timbers and underbrush, without the sharp limbs tearing their flesh and otherwise disfiguring them, he ordered a halt; and there, in the midst of a great forest, they reverently and sadly left their comrades. No grave was dug. They had nothing to dig one with in that hard and rocky soil. But the bodies were hidden in as secret a place as possible; and then logs and chunks of wood were piled on top of them, to keep the wolves away and to hide them from the eyes of their red enemies.

"It seems terrible to leave them like that," Thure said, his voice choking, as the little company of men resumed their march, "where their relatives and friends can never find them, with no sign to show that the dead lie buried there."

"Yes, it does seem a bit terrible," Rex answered.

"And yet," he added thoughtfully as he looked around him, "you could not have found a more fitting resting-place for the bold spirit of Basil Lajeunesse. He loved the great forests and mighty mountains. For years they have been his home; and now he is at rest in their midst. And, as for the two Delawares, their wild spirits would not know what to do if their bodies were buried in a regular white-tombstoned graveyard. They'll sleep better where the wild winds of the mountains blow and the great trees croon above them."

A little before dark that day the two parties met, and at once went into camp for the night.

The deaths of Basil Lajeunesse and the two Delaware Indians hung, like a cloak of gloom, around the spirits of every man in camp. Many of them had been comrades of Basil Lajeunesse for years, and the two Indians had won the respect of all by their courage and faithfulness; and the thought that the sudden and murderous taking off of these men was yet unavenged rankled in every breast. Then they knew that, if this treacherous deed of the Klamaths was allowed to go unpunished, no small party of whites would be safe within reach of their murderous tomahawks. The future protection of other white men that might wander into this region, as well as their own natural feelings of resentment and anger, demanded of them the punishment of these bold marauders; and, judging from the stern faces and the muttered

imprecations of the men, who gathered in groups around the camp-fires as soon as the camp-work was done to brood over the horror of the night before and to plan how best to punish the Klamaths, there would be no laggards in this work of retribution.

Kit Carson, Dick Owens, Rex Holt, Hammer Jones and a few others of the most experienced of the mountaineers gathered in a group by themselves to discuss the measures to be taken on the morrow. Thure was a silent, as was befitting his age, but an eagerly-listening member of this group of veteran Indian fighters.

"I have had a talk with Captain Fremont," Kit Carson said. "The Captain and Lieutenant Gillespie are very anxious to get back to California as quickly as possible. They both appear to think that our American rifles might be needed back there. But the Captain is as anxious as we are to punish the Klamaths before going; and he has agreed to return to California by a different route that will take us around on the other side of Lake Klamath, near where we think the Klamath village is situated, in order to give us the chance to punish the Klamaths in a way that they will not forget. We start at daybreak to-morrow. Now I have been thinking," and Kit Carson paused to glance around his small circle of deeply interested listeners, "that it would be a good idea to leave a dozen or so men hidden here, where they could watch, when we

break camp in the morning. Some of the Indians will be almost sure to visit our camping place as soon as they think we are gone, in the hopes of finding something useful to them that we have left behind and for the purpose of following on along our trail, so as not to lose track of us; and we can get them, and stop their trailing us, at least for the present."

"Bully!" broke in Ham, bringing his great hand down on his broad knee with a clap that resounded throughout the encampment. "That's a bully idea, Kit. Jest count me in for one of th' men tew stay ahind tew watch for them Ingines. I ain't naturally none bloodthirsty, but them vermint that murdered Basil while he slept ain't deservin' of no human mercy an' a leetle bloodlettin' will do 'em a sight of good. So jest count me in that bloodlettin' party, Kit."

"And me," entreated Rex Holt and Dick Owens and the others, almost in one voice.

"The Captain will have to determine who is to be left behind," Kit Carson replied. "But, I reckon, none of you here will be disappointed," he added with a grim smile. "Now to your blankets, for the Captain has ordered the breaking of camp in the morning as soon as it is light enough to see. I am going to bed. Good night," and, picking up his blanket, Kit Carson retired to where the bright light of the fire could not fall upon him, a precaution that he always took when in the Indian coun-

try, and, spreading out his blanket on the ground and carefully rolling himself up in it, he lay down to sleep as peacefully and as comfortably as you do in your soft beds and under your warm roofs.

The others at once followed his example; and soon all in the camp, save the watchful guards, were sleeping soundly.

The next morning Thure awoke to find Beauty, Fremont's negro, Jacob Dodson by right of his own name, bending over him, his black face wrinkled up in what he evidently meant for a pleasant smile of greeting.

"'Cuse me, Massah Thure," he said, "fo' wakin' yo' befo' yo' wake yo'self; but de Captain done wants to see yo' immediately. He's ober yondah on de big log," and he pointed to where Captain Fremont and Lieutenant Gillespie sat on a large log eating their breakfast.

"Goodness!" and Thure jumped to his feet and stared around him, surprised to find the whole camp up and nearly ready for breakfast, "what a sleepyhead I am! All right, Beaut. Tell Captain Fremont that I will be with him just as soon as I wash the sleepyseeds out of my eyes," and, quickly slipping into the few clothes he had taken off for the night, he made a dash for the little stream of water near which the camp was pitched, wondering greatly what it was that Captain Fremont wished to see him about.

Captain Fremont greeted Thure cordially, and,

with a smile, bade him be seated by his side at the breakfast table and join in the meal with them.

"I am told," he said, the moment Thure was seated on the log, with a chunk of roast meat in one hand and a steaming cup of coffee in the other, "that you are the son of Noel Conroyal, who has a large ranch in the Sacramento Valley, and that you have lived there for some five years."

"Yes, sir. It was in 1841 that father moved from New Orleans to California and settled in the Sacramento Valley, where we have been living ever since," Thure replied.

"Then you know nearly all the American settlers in the Valley," Fremont continued.

"Yes, sir. At least all except a few who have moved in lately and settled a good many miles north of us."

"About how many American settlers are there who would fight for their flag, should there be need?"

"Every man of them who had strength enough to lift his rifle to his shoulder," and Thure's face flushed. "We all love the old flag and are ready to fight for it whenever it needs our help."

"You misunderstood me," and Fremont smiled, while his dark eyes kindled. "I did not mean to question your patriotism. I take for granted that every American in the Valley able to carry a rifle will rally round the old flag, when the time comes.

What I wish to know is, as near as you can tell, the number of fighting men in the Valley."

"Oh!" and the flush on Thure's face deepened. "Of course, I can't tell exactly; but," and he paused for a moment to calculate, "I should think there must be in the Sacramento Valley at least two hundred Americans able and willing to fight for our flag, if they had good cause."

"And every one of these accustomed to the use of a rifle," and Fremont's face brightened, as he turned quickly to Lieutenant Gillespie. "With my men added, we can defy all the Mexican soldiers in California. Now," and he again turned to Thure, "do you know anything about how the Californians themselves around where you live feel toward the United States?"

"I know some of them are mad enough at Mexico and the way she has governed us for the past few years to welcome almost any kind of a change; and, if it came to a fight, we'd have some of the leading Californians with us. I have heard them talking with dad. Dad has been hoping something would happen to cause the United States to take California ever since we settled in the Sacramento Valley. He says the country can never amount to anything as long as Mexico rules it: but, once let the United States get hold of it, and everything will jump."

"Those are exactly our sentiments," Fremont

agreed, laughing. "And it now begins to look as if that something was about to happen," he added, his face sobering. "But, I see that the men are almost ready to break camp, and we must bestir ourselves, if we would not be left behind. Thank you, my boy. Now get back to your comrades," and, rising from the log, he signified that the interview was over.

"Can I," and Thure hesitated, while his eyes pleadingly sought Fremont's face.

"Well?" and Fremont smiled. "Out with it."

"Can I remain with the men who are to watch for the Indians? I—"

"No," and the smile left Fremont's face. "My boy," and he laid a kindly hand on Thure's shoulder, "it is a terrible thing to kill a human being under any circumstances, even one of these poor misguided Indians; and only the stern necessities of the wilderness justifies me in thus taking the law into my own hands. Keep your young life as free from sights of death as possible. Now hurry, or you will not be ready to start with the command."

Thure ran at once to his horse and soon had the saddle on his back.

As he stood by the side of the horse waiting the command to mount, he saw fifteen men, with Dick Owens at their head, glide swiftly and silently into the surrounding forest; and knew that the deadly trap was about to be set. No one appeared to take

any notice of the disappearance of these men; and a minute later Fremont gave the command to mount, and, in another minute, the cavalcade was winding its way through the natural lanes of the forest; and the march back to California had begun.

Fremont, whenever possible, always had Kit Carson ride near him at the head of his command, where he would have his experience and skill constantly at his service; and, on this morning, much to Carson's regret, he had declined to allow him to remain with the men left to punish the Klamaths, but had placed them in charge of Dick Owens. Consequently, Thure, a little to his surprise, found Carson by the side of Fremont, when he galloped to his place in the ranks behind Fremont's body-guard of Delaware Indians. His cousin, Rex Holt, and Hammer Jones, however, were nowhere in sight; and he knew that they had had their wishes granted and had formed a part of the fifteen men he had seen vanish so swiftly and silently into the surrounding forest.

Very little was said as the cavalcade rode slowly on through the woods. All the men appeared to be listening anxiously; and every now and then those in the rear would turn to look backward. Thure's own heart was beating rapidly, and he was constantly turning in his saddle and glancing back along the trail, while he started at every sudden sound. Presently, from the silence of the woods behind them, there came the distant sharp crack of

a rifle—a moment later the report of another rifle; and then all was still.

“Thar, that’s two of th’ verminths,” declared a big mountaineer, who rode near Thure.

An hour later the fifteen men caught up with the main body.

“Did you—did you see any Indians?” queried Thure, as Rex and Hammer Jones fell into their places near him.

“Two; and the Delawares have got their scalps,” answered Rex grimly.

“Tell me about it,” pled Thure, his young face flushing.

“Nothing to tell,” Rex replied. “We just saw the two Klamaths nose round the camp for a little while, and then start off to follow your trail. So Ham and Dick Owens shot them; and the Delawares took their scalps. But that don’t even up our account against them, not by the Eternal Andrew Jackson!”

“No, not by the long-eared Ananias, it don’t!” growled Ham. “But jest wait till we get ’tother side of th’ lake, whar their village is, an’, I reckon, we’ll be doin’ some squarin’ of accounts that’ll make them Klamaths do a lot of thinkin’ afore they murder another white man.”

Very little excitement was caused by the killing of the two Indians. The men smiled grimly, as they listened to the story of their deaths, and then their

lips drew together tightly and they gave their attention to the business before them.

The route of our friends now lay along the shores of Lake Klamath, northward until its northernmost point was reached; and then, swinging round to the other side of the lake, they turned southward. For a number of days they traveled on through the solitudes of these mighty forests, over rugged mountains, down into deep canyons, and across beautiful valleys, going very slowly on account of the pack-mules and the roughness; and then, one night, they camped on the banks of a wild mountain stream that poured its cold waters into Lake Klamath a short distance away.

They were now in the region where they expected to find the Klamath village; and the greatest precaution was taken to keep the knowledge of their presence from the enemy. No fires were built, no lights were lit and all were cautioned to make as little noise as possible. No one was allowed even to smoke a pipe, for fear the odor of the tobacco smoke might betray them. A double guard was stationed all around the camp. The men gathered in small groups and talked in low voices until it was time to roll themselves up in their blankets and go to sleep, then all lay down, and soon their heavy breathings told that all had yielded to the sway of Morpheus.

This was the first night that Thure had passed

in camp without the friendly glow of a camp-fire to brighten the gloom of the wilderness; and the silence and mystery and might of the great darkness awed his spirits and fascinated his young imagination. For half an hour after all the others in camp had gone to sleep, he lay staring wonderingly out into the blackness that he could now easily believe might be peopled with all the horrible hobgoblins of childish fancyings, and listening, with shivering apprehension, to the weird sounds that broke a stillness even more awesome than the sounds themselves. Not that he was really afraid, only the darkness and mystery and wildness of it all had thrown him into that peculiar mood, so common to the young, when the veil between reality and fancy is lifted and all the shivering horrors and delightful wonders of the imagination become possibilities. But, at last, even his excited imagination became quiet, and he slept.

CHAPTER V

THE FIGHT AT THE VILLAGE

THE next morning, while Thure was busy with his camp duties, for there were no idlers in Fremont's company and each had his appointed work to attend to, he saw Kit Carson quietly pass around among the men and speak a low word to each. A few minutes later, ten men, with Kit Carson at their head, mounted their horses and rode quietly out of camp. Thure noticed, with a quickening heart, that these ten men were the pick of the command. There were Dick Owens, Alexis Godey, Maxwell, Hammer Jones, Rex Holt and five others, the most experienced Indian fighters in the company.

"Where are they going?" he asked anxiously of Sam Neal, who chanced to be standing near, looking after the disappearing men with longing eyes. "Those men with Kit Carson."

"After the Klamaths," Neal answered. "And I'd be with them, if it wa'n't that Fremont wants me to act as guide while Kit's away." There was a note of pride in his voice as he spoke. "They are to try to find the Klamath village; and, if they find it and the Indians don't act as if they had

any knowledge of our coming, they're to send word back to us and wait until we get there before the attack is made. But, if the Indians act scared, as if they knowed we were coming and wanted to get away before we could get there, then Kit is to do as he thinks best, which means that he'll charge the whole village with his ten men, for I never knowed Kit to balk at numbers when he had ten good men back of him."

"But there might be two or three hundred Indians in the village!" Thure exclaimed apprehensively.

"Don't care if there's a thousand, Kit'll attack them, if they look as if they were getting ready to vamose; and trust to us to get there in time to back him up. He's left word with every one on us to keep our ears strained for rifle shots; and, at the first sound of the crack of a rifle, we're to get to him as quick as the Almighty'll let us. Kit Carson wouldn't like nothing better than to find two or three hundred Indian braves in that village, nor would we," and Neal smiled grimly, as he hurried away to where Fremont stood, talking with Lieutenant Gillespie and a couple of his officers.

This information greatly excited Thure. It certainly did begin to look as if there were going to be an Indian fight and a big one, as if he were going to have his wish granted and see the famous Kit Carson in a battle with the Indians. He hoped that the fight would not be all over before they

could get there. He would like to do some Indian fighting himself; and his blood tingled and his face flushed and his eyes glowed and he gripped his rifle tightly at the thought; and then, suddenly, his face went white and he shuddered. For the first time he realized that fighting meant killing and wounding, meant the horrors of death and the agonies of torn flesh and broken bones, that it was not all bang and glory, that even Rex and Ham and Kit Carson himself might be killed. He did not think of himself. His was not that kind of courage. Nor did he for an instant wish the less to be present, if it came to fighting. But, somehow, for the first time he had come to realize that fighting with guns and knives meant death and agonizing hurts, not only to the enemy, but also to friends; and the thought had chilled his blood and whitened his face. Nevertheless, if possible, he was even more anxious than before to see the fight; for now, if he were not present, the suspense of not knowing who was hurt or killed would be terrible. Consequently, when Fremont gave the order to mount, and the command started slowly along the trail left by Kit Carson and his men, there was not one of the company who listened more anxiously than did Thure for the crack of the rifle that would tell the battle was on.

That was a silent march. No one cared to talk. All were listening, and all sat their horses with muscles tense, like hounds held in leash.

Suddenly Thure straightened up with a jerk in his saddle, and then bent eagerly forward, listening. At the same moment every horseman stopped and sat his saddle like a marble statue for a moment; and then—

“Hurrah, Kit has found them!” yelled one.

“Come on, or we’ll miss the sport!” shouted another.

A moment later and Fremont had detailed a half-dozen men to guard the baggage, and, at the head of the others, was hurrying as swiftly as horse legs could take him over the rough country in the direction whence the sound of distant rifle firing had come so faintly that, for an instant, even his keen ears had doubted the import of its message.

Thure, his heart pounding against his ribs, rode a few paces behind Fremont. Down into a small valley they galloped, pell-mell they splashed through a little stream of water, up the steep side of a ridge they rushed, through thickets and groves of close-growing trees they plunged, down into another valley and up to the top of another ridge they dashed, the sounds of the rifle firing ever coming nearer and growing louder; and then—

“Halt!” commanded Fremont, suddenly pulling up his horse, his eyes intent on the valley below. “Look there!” and he pointed to where, a mile away, black columns of smoke rose above the tops of the trees of a small grove. “We are too late. Carson has set fire to the village.”

At the same moment, as if to verify his words, the rifle firing almost ceased, while the distant cheering of the victorious men reached their ears.

"Hurrah!" yelled every man in the company in answer, and struck spurs into his horse's flanks and galloped madly toward the scene of the battle.

Thure was greatly excited. What boy would not have been to be thus rushing down upon an Indian fight, with the war-whoops of the savages and the shots and yells of the mountaineers beating into his ears! His hand gripped his rifle until his finger tips showed white, and his eyes searched the woods ahead, whence rose the smoke and the sounds of battle, with an intense unnatural stare.

There might be an Indian behind any tree!

In among the trees they plunged, careless of overhanging or protruding limbs; and, suddenly, yelling like madmen, they burst out of the woods and into a natural opening; and the next instant they were in the midst of the smoking lodges of the Indian village. Through the village they dashed and on to the opposite side of the opening, where rifle shots and an occasional war-whoop told them that some of the Indians were still attempting to hold back the victorious white men from following too closely their fleeing families. But, the moment Fremont and his yelling men appeared, these Indians fled; and the battle was over. All now rode back to complete the destruction of the village.

Thure, during this exciting ride, had seen little in detail. His eyes were too intent on seeing Indians to take note of anything else. But now that the climax of the excitement was past, his eyes and his mind could grasp his surroundings in their details. The village had been built in a natural opening in the woods. Along one side of this opening flowed a small stream of water, and scattered along the bank of this stream were the lodges of the Indians, some fifty in number. Everywhere were evidences of the hurry and the confusion with which the Indians had abandoned their homes, while here and there the outstretched body of a red warrior, victims of the deadly long-barreled rifles of the white men, told that they had not been abandoned without having been bravely defended.

"By the eternal Andrew Jackson!" and Rex, the light of battle still in his eyes, a blazing torch in his hand, paused long enough to allow Thure, as he rode back into the village, to leap off his horse and join him, "We've squared accounts with them Klamaths good and plenty. We've punished them for the murder of Basil Lajeunesse and the two brave Delawares so severely that I reckon 'twill be a long while before they will kill another white man in his sleep. Ay, it was a great fight, a great fight! One hundred and fifty bucks against a dozen whites! But we licked them. Drove them before us like a herd of stampeding buffalos, the squaws and papooses wailing and yelling and the

warriors bravely keeping between them and us and fighting desperately until they had escaped in the woods. Them Klamaths are no cowards. But Kit Carson, with a yell, charged right down upon them, as if he had a whole army back of him; and we followed, yelling until I reckon the Indians thought Fremont and all his men were coming. The bucks waited just long enough for the squaws and papooses to get away, and then they, too, legged it for the woods, but not until we'd sent a lot of them to the Happy Hunting-grounds. There's nobody that knows just how to tackle Indians like Kit Carson does. He's worth a regiment of soldiers in an Indian fight—Whoop! Hurrah! Get a torch and we'll help to burn the lesson into them Klamaths' cunning heads that hereafter they are to leave white men alone when journeying peacefully through their country," and Rex, blazing torch in hand, rushed toward a large wigwam, made by weaving the broad leaves of the swamp flag together in such a manner as to form a rain and wind proof wall and roof, and, thrusting the flame of the torch into its side in different places, soon had the whole hut a mass of leaping flames.

"But was no one hurt? Where is Ham and Kit?" panted Thure, hurrying after Rex.

"Just a few arrow scratches, but not a serious hurt that I know of," Rex answered. "We came a flying too fast for the Indians to hit us, I reckon. As for Kit, there he is a-talking to Fremont," and

Rex pointed with the barrel of his rifle to where Fremont and Kit Carson sat on their horses, side by side, watching the burning of the Indian village; "and, as for Ham—I reckon he can speak for himself," he ended abruptly, as the big fellow suddenly appeared, hurrying from around the other side of the blazing wigwam, a lighted torch in one hand, his eyes glittering savagely and his honest face smeared with burnt powder and blood.

Thure, at first, could hardly believe that this savage-looking apparition was his big friend, and shrank back from him. But Ham, at sight of the boy, swung his torch wildly around his head and rushed up to where he stood.

"Hurra!" he yelled. "We've licked 'em! Sent 'em all runnin' faster'n a scar't steer an' a yellin' worser'n a hurt bobcat. Sufferin' snakes, son, how them squaws an' papooses did screech an' leg it for th' woods, when they seed us a-comin', an' we—"

"But," interrupted Thure anxiously, "you are wounded! Your face is all covered with blood."

"Shucks! 'Tain't nuthin'. A big buck throwed his tomahawk at me; an' it jest glanced off my head, same as if it had hit a stone," and Ham grinned. "Reckon he didn't know my head. But I got him. Jest one blow from Sally Ann did for him," and he glanced down affectionately toward the butt of his heavy rifle: "But this ain't no time for spoutin'. Hurra! That's my conflagration,"

and he leaped away toward a large wigwam that still remained unfired, his torch flaring furiously, and soon his "conflagration" was burning gloriously.

Kit Carson, wishing to inflict as much harm as possible on these savages, in order to impress upon them the power of the Whites to avenge any wrong done to a white man, had instructed his men to collect in the lodges everything in the village of any value to the Indians; and then to set them on fire; and it was this work that was now being done, with a thoroughness that soon left nothing but smoking ash heaps of what a few short hours before had been a populous Indian village.

Thure soon had a lighted torch in his hand and was assisting Rex in this destruction of the Indian village. They found large quantities of dried meats and other foods, skins, clothing and the various implements used by the Indians in their daily life; for so precipitate had been their flight that the savages had taken nothing with them except what they had on their backs or in their hands. All this the men collected and piled up in the wigwams in such a manner that when the torch was applied it would be completely destroyed or damaged beyond further usefulness by the fire. Not until every wigwam in the village was a pyramid of leaping flames and rolling smoke did the work of destruction cease.

"Thar," and Hammer Jones surveyed the scene

of smoking devastation with the utmost satisfaction, "I reckon that'll do them Klamaths more good than all th' palaver in the world would. They'll know exactly what that means, an' be mighty kee-ful not tew do anything tew bring th' same kind of punishment down on them ag'in. Ingines know enough not to stick their fingers intew th' same kind of fire twice. An', if thar's any truth in In-gine beliefs, Basil Lajeunesse an' th' tew Dela-warees will have all th' servants they'll be needin', when they go intew camp on the Happy Hunting-grounds," and his eyes rested on the bodies of the dead warriors that had been thrown together in a pile out of reach of the flames.

These harsh, but under the circumstances necessary measures, if they would teach the red men to respect the lives of other white men wandering through their country, having been completed, Fremont called his men together; and, after having sat for a few minutes on the backs of their horses watching the flames to see that the destruction would be complete, they rode back to the place where they had left their pack-train and went into camp some two miles from the burning village.

The men, as soon as they had attended to their camp duties, gathered in groups around the participators in the fight with the Indians, and listened eagerly to their vivid accounts of the battle.

Thure's good fortune joined him to the group

that had surrounded Kit Carson, Rex Holt and Hammer Jones; and he heard Kit Carson himself tell how the battle had been fought and won.

"You see," began this hero of many Indian fights, "the Captain told me that, when I found the village, if the Indians appeared quiet and peaceable like, as if they did not dream of any threatening danger, then I was to conceal my men, send word back to him and wait until he came up; but that if the Indians acted as if the alarm had been given already and knew that we were coming, then I was to use my own judgment about waiting for him before attacking. Well, when we crept up within sight of the village, I saw at once by the excitement and confusion—the squaws and papooses were rushing about wildly, gathering together food and clothing for flight, while the bucks were arming—that they knew we were coming and that if we got any of them we would have to strike quick. I also saw that they had no idea any of us were so close; and that, if we charged right down upon them while they were in this confusion and alarm, the chances were they'd think Fremont and all his men were down upon them and that we'd have them licked before they found out their mistake. Besides I knew the kind of men I had with me. So I gave the word; and, when we got as near to the village as we could get without being seen, we suddenly fired and, jumping to our feet

and yelling as if each man had a dozen tongues, charged down upon them Indians as if the whole creation was back of us.

"Well," and Kit Carson chuckled, "the bluff worked, and, before they awoke to the fact that there were only eleven white men, we had the squaws and the papooses running like mad for the woods and all the bucks, except a few of the bravest, who fought desperately to hold us back long enough for the women and children to escape, trailing after them. But, 'twas the big bluff of the charge that licked them. An Indian can't understand a charge, unless it has overwhelming numbers back of it. They never make any other kind, and don't expect their enemies to."

"But," broke in Ham, "same as with cards, you've got tew know jest how an' when tew work that game of bluff with Ingines, or them verminths'll call your bluff an' take your hair with it. But, it sart'in worked like a yoke of oxen this time. Now, I reckon, we must have killed nigh on tew twenty of them Klamaths; an' they'll be almost sart'in tew come back tew get their dead."

"Yes," and Kit Carson jumped suddenly to his feet, "and, if we have a lot of men hidden near, we can give them a few more dead to care for. 'Twill save a lot of killing in the future, if we make the punishment as severe as possible now. Come on, let's have a war-talk with Fremont," and, followed by Rex and Ham and Dick Owens and a

number of the older and more experienced men, Kit Carson hurried to where Fremont sat on a log before his camp-fire, talking with Lieutenant Gillespie.

"Good," was Fremont's comment, when he had heard the plan of Kit Carson. "Another page added to the Klamaths' lesson will do them no harm. Take twenty men, Dick," and he turned to Dick Owens, "and return to the village and place them in ambush where they can watch the burning wigwams. If the Indians come back, send word at once to me; and make no attack until I get there. Carson, Lieutenant Gillespie and I wish you to join our council of war," and, with a smile, he motioned Kit Carson to a seat on the log by his side and indicated to Dick Owens and the others that they should go.

Rex and Ham were both left behind by the ambuscading party, because they had been with Kit Carson in the Indian fight and it was thought only fair to give others of the men this chance of adding their portion to the punishment of the Klamaths. Thure begged to be allowed to go with them; but Rex refused to permit him to do so, and he was compelled to be content with watching Dick Owens and his twenty men march out of camp and silently vanish in the wilderness.

CHAPTER VI

THURE MAKES A FAMOUS SHOT

THURE CONROYAL had heard Fremont give his orders to Dick Owens, to send him word, should the Indians appear, and not to attack them until he got there; and, when Rex refused to allow him to go with the ambuscading twenty, he determined to manage somehow to be one of the party to go with Fremont, if the message from Dick Owens should come.

"I'll be all ready," he reasoned; "and, when I see Fremont start for his horse, I'll get on the back of mine as quick as I can; and, in the hurry and confusion, I don't believe they'll notice me, at least not until we're on the way, and then I don't believe they'll have the heart to send me back."

Accordingly he kept careful watch of Fremont, in order that he might see the messenger the moment he arrived; and he picketed his horse near and had his saddle and bridle ready, so that he could mount in a hurry; for he knew that when the time came Fremont and the men who went with him would be off with a rush, and that if he went with them he must be ready.

For a long time Fremont and Lieutenant Gilles-

pie and Kit Carson sat on the log talking. Thure was not near enough to hear what they were saying; but he could see their faces and knew by their expressions that the talk was upon some subject of the deepest interest. Presently he saw Fremont take a map out of his pocket; and, spreading it out on the ground, the three men got down on their knees and bent over it, while the finger of Kit Carson traced a route over its surface.

"They're planning what to do when we get back to California," thought Thure. "How I wish I knew what that message was Lieutenant Gillespie brought to Fremont! War with Mexico would mean a lot to dad and to the rest of the Americans in the Sacramento Valley; and they ought to know about it just as soon as possible. Well, one thing is sure, Fremont is not hurrying back to California just for the fun of the thing; and whatever it is that is bringing him back, he—"

His conjecturings stopped abruptly; for, at that moment, into the light of the camp-fire,—it was now long after sundown,—swiftly glided a deerskin-dressed figure that hurried to the side of Fremont. Instantly the three men leaped to their feet, stood for a minute listening while the man delivered his message; and then all three caught up their rifles and ran toward their horses, Fremont calling out his orders as he ran.

Thure waited to see no more; but, catching up saddle and bridle and rifle, he sprang to where his

horse stood, and, with hands that trembled with excitement, threw the saddle on his back, slipped the bit into his mouth, buckled straps and cinches tight, leaped on his back and looked for Fremont. He was already mounted and in the act of dashing out of the camp at the head of half a dozen men. Thure, without a moment's hesitation, dug the spurs into his horse's flanks and galloped after them.

"Hi, thar, boy, whar you goin'?" "Come back," yelled a man, as his horse carried him by one of the camp-fires.

But Thure did not give him the slightest heed, did not even turn in his saddle, and kept his eyes steadily on the men galloping off ahead of him. It would not do to lose sight of them. A nearly full moon shone in a clear sky and he had no difficulty in keeping them in sight. This was all that he cared to do at first, for he did not wish them to know that he was coming until it would be too late to send him back. Fortunately the men did not glance behind them, or, if they did, they did not notice him, and he rode on unhindered.

At the end of a mile Fremont and his men began to slow down and to ride more cautiously, and Thure drew nearer. He saw that the hindmost man was Hammer Jones and that the second man ahead of him was Rex. Kit Carson rode at the head with Fremont. A little further and they were walking their horses, and Thure knew that they

were getting close to the Indian village. Presently Fremont and Kit Carson stopped and consulted together for a minute or two in low voices.

"We are going to ride round to the other side of the village," and Kit Carson turned to the men back of him and raised his voice so that all could hear, "and try to hit the village about opposite from where Owens and his men are stationed. Move as quietly as possible and be ready to charge at the word," and again they rode on.

"Did the—did the messenger say how many Indians there were?" and Thure moved up close by the side of Ham, his voice trembling with excitement as he spoke, forgetting for the moment that he was not known to be there.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" and Ham turned a pair of startled eyes on the lad. "Whar did you drap from? Who told you tew come? This ain't no game for a boy tew butt in."

"I—I," faltered Thure. "I came to see the Indian fight. Please don't send me back, Ham. I'm 'most a man. I can shoot straight; and I do want to see Kit Carson in an Indian fight."

"You sar'tin wouldn't be your own father's son, if you didn't want tew git next tew any scrimmage that's a-goin'," grinned Ham sympathetically. "Wal, I reckon, seein' you're here, you can stay. Leastwise I won't send you back. Dick Owens sent word that 'bout fifty bucks had come back tew git th' dead, so it 'pears like thar might be some

scrappin'. Now, jest keep right close tew me, when th' fightin' begins, an' I'll see that no Ingine gits your scalp. An'—an', I reckon, you'd better keep out of sight of Rex for a spell. You see, he might take you for a leetle boy an' send you back," and Ham chuckled softly.

While thus speaking, Ham and Thure had ridden side by side, with heads close together, and had spoken in such low voices that their words had not reached the ears of those ahead, who still had no knowledge of the addition of one boy to their party.

Thure was about to reply to Ham, when again Fremont and Kit Carson halted. They were now in a thick growth of timber, where it was so dark that only the outlines of the men showed dimly, as they sat silent and watchful on their horses.

"I reckon we're 'bout tew make th' attack," whispered Ham. "Now, be sure an' keep right 'longside of me," and there was a note of anxiety in his voice.

"Ye—es," answered Thure. "I can see the opening where the village is through the trees. The fires are still burning."

"Careful men," cautioned Fremont, in a low voice. "We will ride slow until we see the Indians, and then fire and charge. That will tell Owens we are here. Forward!" and very slowly and cautiously the little body of horsemen moved through the fringe of trees and out into the opening, where the still smoldering fires of the wig-

wams told where the Indian village had been, every eye straining itself to catch the first glimpse of the Klamaths.

"There goes one!" suddenly yelled Kit Carson, at the same moment striking his spurs into his horse's flanks and racing away toward a dusky figure that now could be seen gliding about among the smoking ruins.

With a wild yell, the men followed.

The Indian saw his enemies too late. He made a desperate effort to reach the woods; but, before he could do so, Kit Carson, who was considerably in advance of all the others except Fremont, was upon him.

During this exciting chase Thure had kept his eyes on Kit Carson; and now, when he was within a few feet of the Indian, he saw him suddenly throw his rifle to his shoulder and attempt to fire. At the same moment he saw the Indian whirl about, his bended bow ready to shoot the arrow drawn to its head.

"My God, Kit's gun has missed fire! Th' In-gine 'll git him!" yelled Ham.

For an instant Thure was horror-stricken. It did not seem possible that Kit Carson could escape that deadly arrow, aimed within ten feet of his breast. If he could only do something! In the excitement of the moment his horse had outstripped all the others, and now he was the nearest of all, except Fremont, to the scene of the impending trag-

edy. It would be useless for him to attempt to shoot from the back of his speeding horse. He could not hit the Indian. He might even kill Carson. But—

At the thought the boy suddenly rose in his stirrups and leaped from his horse's back, his rifle gripped in his hand, his eyes on the Indian. He might be in time to shoot from the ground. But, even as his feet struck the ground, he saw that he would be too late to save Carson. The arrow was already aimed, the bow-string drawn to the Indian's ear— Then he saw the horse of Fremont leap upon the Indian and hurl him to the ground. But, in another moment, the Klamath was again on his feet and fitting another arrow to his string; and this time his desperate eyes were bent on Fremont.

Thure had often practiced jumping off his horse's back while going at full speed; and now the skill thus acquired stood him in good stead. He landed safely on his feet, ran a few quick steps, and stopped, his rifle to his shoulder, just as the Indian turned his bow toward Fremont, who, for the moment, was at his mercy. The distance was not great, not more than fifty yards, and in the clear moonlight Thure could see quite distinctly. For an instant his keen young eyes glanced along the barrel of his rifle, and then he pulled the trigger.

The bended bow dropped from the Indian's hand; and, with a wild death-whoop, he leaped straight up into the air and fell to the ground and lay still. In

another moment Fremont and Kit Carson and the dead Indian were surrounded by the excited men, while Dick Owens and his twenty men were running from their place of concealment toward the spot.

Thure, his blood thumping violently through his veins, stood, for a moment after he had fired, stark still; then, his face going white and his limbs feeling unaccountably weak, he turned to look for his horse. The trained animal had run only a short distance; and now stood, quietly cropping the grass, his eyes on the form of his young master. Thure whistled and the horse lifted his head and trotted swiftly up to his side; and the boy climbed up into the saddle, and rode slowly toward the men grouped around the dead Indian.

By this time Dick Owens and his men had reached the spot. He was greeted by a chorus of inquiries after those fifty Indians he had reported as having seen in the ruined village.

"You must have had Inguine fever, Dick," Ham declared in great disgust, "an' seen Ingines in your brain; for thar sart'in wa'n't none here, except that lone buck," and he glanced toward the dead Indian. "Fifty Ingines! Hu! You'd better wear specs!"

"Well," answered Owens, his face flushing, "I had no rope round them Indians to hold them with until you came; and I did have orders to do nothing, except to look at them, until you got here; and they didn't seem to care to wait until you could

come and kill them; so, just before you got here, they all hurried off— Fifty of them, and we couldn't even fire a shot at them!" he ended in disgust.

"You obeyed your orders, like good soldiers," Fremont interposed; "and that is all any commander can ask of his men. You—" His eyes suddenly caught sight of Thure, who had pushed his way through the crowd of men and now sat on his horse almost directly behind Dick Owens, and a flash of anger came into them.

"How comes it, young sir, that you are here?" he demanded sternly. "Who gave you permission to leave camp? Did you have anything to do with this boy's presence here, Holt?" and he turned a frowning face to Rex Holt, who was staring at Thure, as if he could hardly believe that he was seeing right.

"No," answered Rex. "He must have tagged along behind us. I'd have sent him back a-running, if I had known it."

"You knew that it was against orders for anyone to leave camp without my permission?" and Fremont again turned to Thure.

Yes—s, sir," stammered Thure, whose face was now very red and who felt more like crawling under his horse's belly than he did like remaining in the saddle.

"I thought every man and boy in camp knew that I made no rules, except those that I expected to be

obeyed by every man and boy in camp," continued Fremont. His voice was stern, but it was his eyes that Thure dreaded most. They seemed to look right through him and to dominate every nerve in his body.

"I—I—"

"Silence!" and Fremont lifted his hand warningly. "In a camp like this it is absolutely necessary to preserve discipline," and his face hardened. "Young man, hand your rifle and knife and pistol to Hammer Jones. You may consider yourself under arrest and without the privilege of carrying any weapon, until I give you permission. Hammer Jones, take his weapons."

Tears of shame at this public humiliation came into Thure's eyes. He tried to speak, but his voice choked in his throat; and, turning to Ham, who sat on his horse the nearest to him, he silently extended his rifle.

"Jest keep th' gun a spell, son, I reckon th' Captain don't know yit what it done for him. I'll give him a leetle loomination," and, waving the rifle back, Ham spurred his horse up close to Fremont's side.

"Beggin' pardon, Captain," he began; "but afore I take that boy's gun, I want you tew know what it did for you. See that Engine?" and Ham pointed to the dead warrior. "Wal, 'twas that gun that fired th' ball that killed that vermint."

"What's that?" and Fremont turned a pair of

surprised eyes on Ham's face. "The boy shot that Indian!"

"Sart'in, he was ahind that gun; an' 'twas 'bout th' purtiest bit of Indian killin' I've ever seed," and Ham, in his own peculiar style, went on to relate how Thure had leaped from his horse while the animal was going at full speed, landed on his feet and shot the Indian. "An', I reckon, he didn't git him none tew sudden," he ended; "for th' Ingine's bow was bent, an' you know, Captain, whar that arrer was bound for."

"I do," and Captain Fremont's face was very sober now. "In another second it would have been in my body."

For a minute or two he sat silent on his horse, his eyes bent steadily on the flushed face of the boy.

"You may keep your gun and other weapons, Thure," he said at length; "and this time, for the sake of the quick wit and courage you have shown, I will pardon your serious breach of discipline. But, in the future, remember that every order I make I make for the good of all, and that all must obey it implicitly. My boy," and Fremont suddenly urged his horse up close to the lad's side and gripped him by the hand, "it looks as if that shot saved my life; and I want to thank you as I would thank a man; for no man could have acted with better judgment and greater courage than you did. It is the man that sees clearly what to do and does it promptly, at the moment of need, that wins in this

life. I shall let your father know of this deed, Thure."

Thure stammered some reply. No one who heard him could tell what he said. He found this public thanking almost worse to endure than the public rebuking had been; and when Kit Carson suddenly rode up to the side of Fremont, he was deeply thankful for the diversion the act brought about.

"Captain Fremont," Carson said, his eyes on his commander's face, "I am not good at putting my feelings into words; but, I reckon, if it had not been for you and Sacramento, that Indian's arrow would have got me sure. I just want you to know that I know, and that I won't forget," and, abruptly whirling his horse about, he rode away before Fremont had a chance to reply.

A couple of minutes later Carson hurried back to the side of Fremont and suggested that it would be wise to hasten back to the camp, because of the possibility that the Klamaths might attempt to get revenge by attacking the camp, while so many of the men were absent.

Accordingly Fremont at once gave the order for all to return to the camp; and, with a final glance around the still smoking Klamath village to see that the ruin was complete, the march back to camp was begun.

Thure, now that he had been made to realize how wrong he had been in leaving camp

without its commander's permission, was very grateful to the kind fates for giving his adventure such a propitious ending; and vowed that never again would he give Fremont cause to look at him with those dreadful eyes of condemnation. Only the thought that, possibly, he had saved the life of Fremont and had won his commendation as well as his condemnation, recompensed him for those few moments of humiliation, when he had sat on his horse and faced his angry commander and had been condemned to the bitter degradation of surrendering his weapons. He felt very grateful to Ham for taking his part, and took the first opportunity on their way back to camp to thank him.

"Shucks," declared that worthy, "don't take th' trouble tew thank a feller for a thing like that. I knowed, if the Captain knowed what you'd done, he'd pardon your breach of discipline; an' I knowed that he otter know, so I told him. Say, that was a powerful cute trick of yourn, jumpin' off your hoss an' gettin' that Engine. Cute enough for Kit Carson; an' I'm proud of you."

"So am I," and Rex rode up to the side of Thure and gripped his hand and shook it warmly. "And your dad will be proud of you when he hears about it. But don't go against the Captain's discipline again. That is one thing he won't stand for; and every man in camp knows it; and that is why he has so little trouble with his men."

Thure had flushed with pleasure at these words

of Ham and Rex. To be told that he had done something worthy of the doing of Kit Carson was, indeed, high praise, the highest in his estimation; but he really did not believe he deserved all this commending.

"I really did not do very much," he said. "You see, ever since coming to California, I have lived on horseback; and at home we boys practice jumping on and off our horses when going at full speed almost every day; and there is hardly a boy of my age in California who could not have done what I did. I just happened to think of it and did it at the right time. That is all."

"Reckon that was all," Ham grinned. "Jest th' think an' th' do; an' that's 'bout all thar is tew any brave deed. Wal, here we be at camp an' no Ingines. I calculate we won't have any more trouble with them Klamaths. They'll know enough tew let peaceable white men alone after this. They sure did git punished good and plenty. Wal, that's what them that needs it usually gits in this life," he added philosophically.

When Thure threw himself down on his blanket that night he was very tired; but it was long before sleep could drive the exciting happenings of the day out of his mind. He had seen an Indian fight, that is, he had almost seen it; and he, Thure Conroyal, had actually killed an Indian! But the killing had been done to save life, the life of his commander; and, while he shuddered at the thought of the dead

Indian, he felt that the necessity of the moment justified the shot. Again and again he lived over the exciting scenes of the day, until, at last, they began to grow less and less real, and, finally, his eyes closed and he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER VII

LASSOING A GRIZZLY

EARLY the next morning the march back to the Sacramento Valley was resumed. All were anxious to reach California as speedily as possible. The men, now that they had punished the Klamaths, in accordance to their rough but effective ideas of justice, were in splendid spirits. The souls of the dead had been appeased, and they could now go about their regular work, content, since they had done their duty by their fallen comrades. There was something of the superstition of the Indians, among whom they had spent so much of their lives, in the religion of these rough men of the rifle. They could not rest easy until a comrade's death had been avenged; but, when once that vengeance had been exacted, the shadows cast by the dead vanished. Consequently, the fight with the Klamaths and the destruction of their village had swept the gloom from the hearts of Fremont's men; and, as they rode through the virgin forests on this morning, boisterous jokes and loud laughter fell from their lips.

Scouts were thrown out ahead. They had no intention of being caught in an Indian ambush and

they feared no open attack; so that the main body were required to observe few precautions, as they journeyed along, and could make about as much noise as they cared to. They saw no signs of Indians until the fourth day out from the camp where the Klamath village had been burned; but, on that day, when Maxwell and Archambeau, the two hunters for the day's meat, came in at night, each bearing on his back an elk, they told, as they sat and smoked in the peace and warmth of the brightly-glowing camp-fire, of a strange adventure they had had with a lone Indian.

They were looking for deer in a small valley some three miles from the line of march, when they were surprised to see a single Indian walking slowly toward them. The two hunters, not caring to harm the warrior and wishing to get a little information from him about the country where they were, promptly halted and laid down their arms, to signify their peaceable intentions. The Indian appeared to understand their actions; for he showed no signs of fear and continued walking boldly toward them. When a little beyond bowshot he stopped, and, to the surprise of the two hunters, took from his quiver two or three young crows, and, after untying the string that held them, carefully concealed the young birds in the grass. He then again started toward the hunters, who were watching his actions with great curiosity and who were now a little startled to see that, while he advanced,

he was getting his weapons ready for instant use.

"Wal," and Maxwell, who was telling the story, stopped to take a puff at his pipe, "his gettin' his bow an' arrers whar he could use 'em mighty sudden, kinder s'prised us, seein' that we'd a-put our guns down an' were a-standin' empty-handed; but we calculated that he was jest a-takin' extra precautions 'g'inst our playin' him false, an' so didn't think none much of it, till, all of a sudden, when he'd got within easy bowshot, th' skunk ups an' lets fly an arrer that quick that I nearly jumps out of my britches gettin' out of th' way of it."

"'Hi, thar!' I yells. 'Keep them arrers tew home, unless you're wantin' bullets in exchange.' At the same time both on us began makin' some more peace signs, for it looked tew much like murder tew shoot that lone Injun. But that darned vermint kept on comin' closer an' a-shootin' jest as fast as he could slip th' arrers from his bow; an' we keeps a-dodgin' an' a-yellin' for him tew quit, till one of th' arrers rips through my huntin' shirt not more'n six inches from my heart an' a nuther clips th' top off Archambeau's ear, an' more still a-comin'; an' I seed we'd have tew git th' Injun or he'd git us, so I grabs up my gun an' shot th' loonatik. Now, what fool notion do you reckon had got intew that buck's head? I never seed one act like that afore," and Maxwell turned his eyes inquiringly to the face of Kit Carson.

"Can't tell," Carson answered, "unless he was

wanting to commit suicide. It would take a better head than mine to figure out the reasons for all the queer notions that get into the heads of Indians. Now, you fellows had better get back out of the bright light of the fire," and Carson turned to the men who had crowded close around Maxwell while he was narrating the adventure with the Indian, many of them being where the light of the camp-fire shone brightly upon them, "or some Indian may creep up in the darkness and slip an arrow into one of you." Carson himself sat in the shadows, where almost none of the light from the fire reached him.

"The guard 'll get any Indian before he could get us. We ain't scared," vaunted one of the men.

"All right, boys. You can hang round the fire, if you want to; but I don't care to give an Indian the chance to slip an arrow into me when I can't see him. I've seen them get eight good men that way, and I don't want to be the ninth," Carson returned quietly, resuming his smoking.

Thure smiled, as he noticed how one man after another, following these words of Carson, quickly moved out of the fire light, the scoffer himself being the last to move. As he rose to his feet—"chuck"—and an arrow three feet long struck the trunk of the tree against which he had been resting his back, and stuck there, quivering with the force of the impact.

The man jumped about three feet up into the air;

but, when he came down, he had his rifle to his shoulder and was glaring savagely off into the silence of the surrounding darkness.

At the sound of the thud of that arrow Kit Carson and every man in the camp leaped to their feet, rifles in their hands; but not another sign nor a sound of an Indian was to be seen or heard. Kit Carson and Godey and Rex Holt vanished swiftly into the darkness in the direction whence the arrow had come; but they found nothing, and the guards had neither seen a suspicious movement nor heard a suspicious sound.

There was no more hanging round in the bright light of the camp-fires that night.

Game, through the greater part of the region through which our friends had been passing, was abundant, and the hunters had had little difficulty in securing sufficient meat to satisfy the hunger of all; but now they were entering a more barren region, where the deer and the other food animals were exceedingly scarce and difficult to kill and the hunters frequently came into camp empty-handed.

One afternoon, when they had had no fresh meat in camp for two days, as they were slowly winding their way along the side of a narrow twisting valley, suddenly, from behind a rock, where he had been lying in the sun, a huge grizzly bear jumped to his feet and turned a pair of astounded eyes in their direction. The bear did not run, did not appear to be in the least afraid; but settled back on his

haunches and watched them with the greatest curiosity and wonderment, as if he were trying to figure out in his mind what manner of animals these strange beings might be and whether or not they would be good to eat. However, whatever the cogitations of Bruin might have been, there was no doubt in the minds of these hungry men as to his fitness for eating; and, with a glad shout, a dozen rifles were thrown to as many shoulders.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" yelled Thure excitedly. "Let's rope him! I have often seen the Californians rope grizzlies and it is great fun," and, with swift fingers, he began unloosing the long lasso that hung to the pommel of his saddle.

"All right," agreed the men, lowering their rifles. "Twill save powder and ball."

"An' liven us all up a bit, I reckon," amended Hammer Jones, already grinning in anticipation of the "fun" he felt sure the grizzly would give the ropers.

Fremont, always willing to give his men every possible relaxation from the hard labors and the strict discipline of the march and the camp, when the proper opportunity offered, promptly called a halt; and, sitting on his horse by the sides of Kit Carson and Lieutenant Gillespie, was one of the most interested and amused watchers of the exciting scene that followed.

In those days nearly every western man had more or less skill with the lasso, and every horse-

man had a reata or rope fastened to the high pommel of his deep saddle. This was almost as necessary a part of his equipment as was his rifle; for, without it, in that stableless and fenceless land, he would have been at a loss how to recapture his horses, once they were free, as they must often be in order to forage for their food.

The moment Thure had yelled, "Let's lasso him!" a half-dozen of the most skilful of the lasso throwers had handed their rifles to their companions and had begun untying their reatas. These now, accompanied by Thure, whose life in the Sacramento Valley had made him almost as skilful as a native Californian with the lasso, began riding slowly toward the grizzly, in such a manner as to form a circle around him.

The bear, during these maneuvers, which had taken much less time to accomplish than it has to describe them, had sat on his haunches watching them, swinging his head from side to side and occasionally sniffing the air and uttering a loud, questioning "huff-huff," but showing little evidence of fear or rage. Now, however, when the horsemen began to draw near and to act as if they were really after him, the monarch of those mountains, he began to show his indignation and combativeness by deep, angry growls and the bristling up of his hair along the back of his neck and shoulders and a furious glare in his little wicked looking eyes.

"Hurra! He's goin' tew give 'em a tussel,"

commented Ham rejoicingly. "Now we will see some fun, and, I reckon, th' fun won't all be on th' side of th' rope throwers neither."

"Golly!" and Fremont's negro, Beaut, as the men called him, who stood near Ham, stared open-mouthed and wide-eyed at the circling horsemen and the big bear, "dey ain't spec'latin' on cotchin' dat monster wid dem lil' skin ropes, am dey Massah Ham? 'Cause, if dat am de object ob der circum-
ulatin' round dat b'ar, den dis nigger am done gwine to climb a tree. I don't like de looks ob dat b'ar's mouff. De tongue am too red an' de teeth am too long an' sharp."

"Sart'in, they are a-goin' tew cotch that b'ar," and Ham grinned down into the negro's face. "An', I reckon, they are a-goin' tew bring him right tew you, red tongue an' long teeth an' all, so that you can butcher him alive for your master. That's why they're so powerful anxious tew cotch th' critter alive, ain't it Bob?" and Ham, with a sly wink of the eye out of sight of the negro, turned to the man nearest to him for confirmation.

"Shore," the man replied solemnly. "Th' Cap-
tain wants that b'ar killed by Beaut. 'Pears tew think no one else knows jest how tew kill a grizzly, so that th' meat 'll taste jest right, like Beaut here does, an' he's 'spressly ordered th' cotchin' of that b'ar alive, so that Beaut can kill him with his butcher— Hi, thar, nigger whar you goin'?"

Beaut, during these few moments, had kept one

eye on the bear and the other on the face of the speaker and his body bent ready for an instant spring toward a ragged oak tree that grew a couple of rods away. Now, while Bob had been speaking, the horsemen had been circling closer and closer around the grizzly, and the growls of the bear had been growing louder and louder, until, suddenly, one of the horsemen, had thrown his reata, and the loop, darting swiftly through the air, had tightened with a jerk around the grizzly's neck. This had been too much for bruin's already ruffled temper, and, with a roar of rage, he had hurled his nine hundred or more pounds of solid bone and muscle and shaggy hair straight toward the daring horseman, who chanced to flee directly toward the spot where Beaut was standing; and it was the negro's sudden leap for the oak tree at this horrible sight, that had caused the startled query of Bob. The negro did not stop to answer him, nor did Bob or Ham or any of the others in that immediate vicinity wait for an answer.

"Rope him, quick!" "Catch him by the hind legs!" "Throw him!" yelled the men, as they scattered in every direction out of the way of the racing man and bear, while the horses and mules snorted with terror and nearly stampeded.

Thure and the other lasso-throwers chased madly after the bear, and whirled and threw their ropes in efforts to catch him by one of his legs and throw him; but, owing either to their lack of skill or to

the difficulties of the catch, Thure's rope was the only one to grip and to hold to a leg. His reata caught the bear by one of his hind legs, and the feat was welcomed with a great shout from the men. But, so tremendous was the strength of the bear and so great the momentum of his huge body, that, when Thure whirled his horse and attempted to check bruin's speed, his horse was jerked violently forward and the boy sent flying over his head, while the bear continued the chase, dragging the horse along after him for half a dozen rods, when the weight and the strength of the horse became too great for even his might to overcome, and, with a roar that made the surrounding mountains echo, he whirled furiously about, just as Thure, who had been partially stunned, struggled to get on his feet. The wicked eyes, now red with fury, caught sight of the lad only a few yards from them; and, with a snarling growl, the bear rushed for the half-dazed boy; and, before the horse and the man that held the other end of the rope which had caught around the bear's neck, could check him, he was within ten feet of Thure, growling furiously and straining his great muscles to reach the lad, who had not yet recovered sufficiently from his fall to realize his peril.

At this critical moment the reata broke, and the grizzly plunged forward almost on top of Thure, and a cry of horror went up from the men.

Ham and Rex sprang forward, their knives in their hands, and rifles were thrown swiftly to a



THE GRIZZLY PLUNGED FORWARD ALMOST ON TOP OF THURE

dozen shoulders; but, before a blow could be struck or a rifle fired, an unearthly yell made every man jump, and a great black something, with whirling arms and legs, tumbled apparently out of the skies, and, with another ear-splitting yell, landed plump on top of the grizzly's back.

At this utterly unexpected onset by that terrible black thing and with the sounds of those terrifying yells piercing into his ears, the grizzly, with a startled "whoof!" jumped clear over the half-risen form of Thure and struck out madly across the valley, leaving the black thing yelling and sprawling wildly by the side of Thure. In an instant more the bear had reached the end of Thure's lasso, which still clung to his hind leg; but, so great was his strength in his terror, that he jerked the horse off his feet, snapped the strong rope, as if it had been a pack thread and sped on, followed by bullets from nearly every rifle in the company; and not until Kit Carson and Rex fired almost simultaneously did he drop, his career of brutal strength and ferocity ended.

"Wal, I'll be durned, if 'tain't Beaut!" and Hammer Jones, now that the grizzly was accounted for, stared in astonishment, as the black thing that had fallen so opportunely on top of the grizzly's back, leaped to his feet and showed the terror-stricken face of the negro; and then, with one wild glare around and a yell that made the hair stand up straight on the back of the neck, bounded off, his long legs jumping up and down like the pistons of a

steam engine gone crazy and his long arms whirling about his shoulders like two flails.

"Stop him! He's headed for the Gulf of Mexico!" yelled one of the men, as the fleeing negro, in his terror, gave no evidence of slowing up.

Instantly one of the lasso-throwers, with a shout, struck his spurs into his horse and started after the frightened negro. A few bounds and his horse had brought him within range. The reata whirled around his head, and then the loop darted forward and settled swiftly about the waist of the running negro. The trained horse whirled about and braced his feet; and the next instant Beaut found himself sprawling on his back, with what he took to be the grizzly's arms squeezing the breath out of his body.

"Sabe me! Sabe dis niggah!" he shrieked, struggling violently and kicking and pounding madly with his feet and fists. "O Gawd, I done knows I's been a wicked, skinful ob obnikity, but sabe mah po' hide from de tooths ob dis monstah, an' I's gwine to—"

His bulging eyes caught sight of the faces of the men who had crowded around him the moment he had been thrown to the ground, and his mouth dropped wide open and he stared blankly around for an instant; and then he furiously tore the slackened lasso from around his waist and jumped to his feet.

"Who done took me fo' dat grizzly b'ar?" and he glared around until his rolling eyes rested on the

grinning face of the lasso-thrower, while the ludicrous grimaces of astonishment, indignation and fear that alternately chased one another over his black countenance, set every one of the men around him into roars of laughter. "Stretch yo' big mouff an' grin," and he shook his fist at the man, "yo'—whar am dat grizzly?" and the look of fear came back on his face and his eyes rolled wildly until they found the outstretched body of the dead bear. "Golly, I done br'ak his back!" and a grimace of delight lighted up his face. "I done thought I feel somethin' busticate, when mah head go crack ag'in his backbone. Dar sart'inly am pow'ful good bones in dis heah head!" and Beaut felt proudly of the kinky top of his head, all his fear gone, now that the grizzly had been killed, and all of his assurance and good-nature back again.

The mysterious and sudden appearance of Beauty on the scene was easily explained. Thure had fallen almost directly under the tree in which the negro had taken refuge; and, in his excitement and fear, Beauty, just at the moment the grizzly was about to hurl himself upon the boy, had lost his balance and tumbled headfirst from the overhanging limb to which he had been frantically clinging, with the result already narrated.

"An' I done spec'lates it war a mighty good thing fo' yo' dat I done drap out ob dat tree jes' per'zackly when I done did," Beaut confided to Thure, who by this time had fully recovered his wits, "or dat ol'

b'ar git yo' fo' sho'. Golly, but I war scart fo' sho'! I done thought I's gwine to glory mighty sudden. No mo' grizzly b'ar lasso'in' fo' dis nig-gah—No, nebber ag'in," and, with a ludicrous wave of one of his great flat hands, he hurried away to look after the mule carrying Fremont's baggage, which was his personal charge.

As it was already late in the afternoon and the location suitable for camping purposes, Fremont determined to pitch his camp right there for the night, and give his hungry men a chance to feast on the meat of the grizzly bear that had created such a lively diversion for all of them. Accordingly, in a very few minutes, the horses and the mules were unsaddled and unpacked, tents pitched, camp-fires burning and great chunks of bear meat broiling over the glowing coals, which the hungry men were soon devouring almost ravenously.

Thure found the grizzly steak exceedingly tough and of a disagreeable flavor; yet, so great was his hunger, that he ate it with a relish that would have been impossible under other circumstances.

"Well, it's better than eating mule meat anyway," he consoled himself. "And it would have had to have been mule meat, if we had not got the bear. I heard Kit Carson telling Fremont that we would have to kill a mule, if we didn't get other meat before night; and, somehow, it doesn't seem just right to eat a mule or a horse, even if the meat

does taste good. Say," and he turned to Rex who was seated by his side, "about how much longer do you think it will take us to get to the Sacramento Valley?"

"We ought to hit the headwaters of the Sacramento River about day after to-morrow," Rex replied; "and 'twon't take long after that to get to the Valley. You ain't getting tired of the wilderness, are you?"

"No, sir-ree," Thure answered emphatically. "I could always live in it; but I would just like to know how everything is with father and mother and the rest, and what is happening in the Valley. It seems like years since I have heard a word from home; and—and so many things might happen."

"Well, I reckon, you are not the only one anxious to get back," and Rex glanced to where Kit Carson and Fremont and Lieutenant Gillespie sat on a log a short distance away talking very earnestly together. "I heard Kit say not an hour ago that Fremont was getting powerful anxious to get to California, and that from now on we were going to travel just as fast as the Lord would let us; and I reckon, we all want to get there in time to join in the scrimmage, should there be any fighting, so there won't be any kicking over the fast traveling."

There was not much left of the grizzly bear, except his skin and bones, when the hungry men completed their feast that night, and, with well-filled

stomachs, rolled themselves up in their blankets to sleep the quiet sleep that comes to the weary when their day has been spent in the pure air of nature's great sanatorium—the virgin mountains and forests.

CHAPTER VIII

A BRAVE INDIAN

REX proved a true prophet, for on the afternoon of the second day after their adventure with the big grizzly, they came upon the brawling waters of a swift mountain stream; and Thure was told that this was the beginning of the Sacramento River. They now journeyed down this stream until they came within a mile or so of the point where the river passes through a deep canyon, with nearly perpendicular walls of jagged rock. Here Kit Carson's suspicions were aroused, and he warned Captain Fremont that it would not be wise for them to attempt to pass through the canyon, since it offered every advantage for an ambush and he feared that their old enemies, the Klamaths, might use the opportunity it afforded to avenge the destruction of their village.

"For the last two or three days," he said, "Dick Owens and I and some of the others have been trying to figure out what all the Indian smoke-signals we've been seeing lately mean; and we've concluded that the Klamaths have been gathering their warriors for the purpose of laying a trap for us somewhere; and we think that that there canyon

is the most likely place for the setting of the trap. At any rate they have been watching us all along, and it would be foolish to run the risk of an ambushade by going into that canyon, when we can cross the river and go on down by a safer trail."

"We will take the safer trail, then," Fremont said. "Lead the way across the river."

Accordingly, a little further down the stream, when they came to a fording place, they left the trail and, crossing the river, continued on their way. But hardly had they done this, when a large number of Indians rushed out from among the rocks in the vicinity of the canyon, howling with baffled rage.

"Wal, I'll be 'durned, if Kit wa'n't dead right!" Ham exclaimed admiringly. "I reckon he must smell an Ingene ambush. I never knowed a man like him for gittin' on tew Ingene tricks. 'Pears tew smell 'em out, same as a b'ar can a squirrel in a hole."

"Look there! Look there!" Thure cried excitedly at this moment, pointing down the little valley ahead of them. "See, a lot of the Indians are trying to get in ahead of us. Ah, there goes Kit Carson and Godey and Owens after them! And the Indians are already running for cover! Now, what do you think of that!" he exclaimed a moment later wonderingly. "Why don't that Indian run with the others? Don't he know that he

surely will be killed? He has only his bow and arrows and our men have rifles."

As Thure spoke, the Indian who had so courageously, if foolishly, refused to run, suddenly leaped behind a rock, swiftly strung his bow, and, placing several arrows in his mouth where he could get at them quickly, coolly awaited the coming of the three horsemen. The moment they came within range of his bow, he began shooting at them with such wonderful quickness and dexterity, that they were kept so busy dodging his arrows that not one of them dared to raise his rifle to his shoulder.

"Now, I call that a mighty brave deed, if 'tis an Ingine that's a-doin' it; but 'bout as foolish as jumpin' in front of a ragin' grizzly b'ar an' 'temptin' tew tear th' life out of him with empty hands," Ham commented, watching the Indian and the dodging men. "They'll git him, an' he won't git no satisfaction neither. Thar, I knowed they wouldn't stand for that long. Now watch Kit Carson, an' you'll see that Ingine go under sudden."

At that moment Thure saw Kit Carson wheel his horse and, riding out of range, dismount and begin creeping up toward the Indian, but in such a manner that when he came within shooting distance he would be on the other side of the rock, where the warrior would be exposed to his rifle fire or to the fire of his comrades, if he moved. Thure watched the swift, unseen advance of Kit

Carson with excited eyes. In a very few minutes he had reached the desired point of vantage, while his comrades had been keeping the Indian too busy for him to give any attention to the movements of Carson.

"Now he's got him!" declared Ham, his eyes glinting as they watched Carson slowly raise himself up from the grass, his rifle to his shoulder.

For a brief instant the rifle and the man were motionless; and then Thure saw the smoke leap from the muzzle of the gun and the Indian bound convulsively up into the air and fall forward flat on his face.

When Carson rode back to the line, he brought with him a beautifully-made bow and a quiver, which still held a large number of arrows.

"Keep these in memory of a very brave, but a very foolish Indian," he said, as he handed the bow and the quiver of arrows to Lieutenant Gillespie. "It looks a little inhuman to kill an Indian like that; but, if we had not got him, he would have got one of us. Evidently he had made a vow to kill the next white man he saw, or get killed himself, or some such crazy thing. So we had to get him, Lieutenant."

"I understand," Lieutenant Gillespie smiled back, as he took the bow and the quiver of arrows. "You can't put a white man's way of thinking into an Indian's skull; and, when we are in the Indian country, we have to do as the Indians do and some-

times kill according to Indian fashion, or get killed ourselves."

They had no further trouble with the Indians during the day, although the watchful eyes of Kit Carson and the other scouts soon learned that they were being closely followed and watched by their red enemies.

Now, for the first time, our friends were confronted with one of the most serious and difficult problems of wilderness traveling—empty stomachs and nothing in sight to put into them. That morning had seen the eating of the last of the food supplies that they had brought with them; and, when the hunters, who had been out all day, came in, they were empty handed. Fremont at once sent out two other hunters, in the desperate hope that they might secure something fit to eat before it became too dark to see; but the only thing they succeeded in killing was an Indian, whom they found trying to steal some of their horses; and, as they were not yet reduced to eating "Injun," this did not allay their hunger any, although it warned them of the necessity of keeping careful guard. Of course, there were the mules and the horses; but they were hardly ready for mule meat yet, and so that night all went supperless to bed and arose the next morning and set out breakfastless on the day's journey.

This was a new and exceedingly disagreeable experience to Thure, who had never missed a meal before; but it was one of the commonplaces of

wilderness travel to the hardy men who were with him. They only tightened up their belts a notch or two, and the grimness of their faces and manners deepened a little, and they rode on a little more silently than usual. When men journeyed into a wilderness they could not expect the accommodations of civilization.

But, fortunately, their fast was soon broken; for they had advanced only a few miles, when out from a little grove of trees, where they had been feeding on the tender bark of the new shoots, jumped a couple of deer. Thure and Rex were the nearest to the animals, and, instantly springing off their horses, they fell each on one knee and leveled their rifles.

"I'll take the buck," cautioned Rex; and the next instant both rifles cracked.

"Hurra, you've got 'em both!" shouted Ham. "I saw 'em jerk their flags down."

As he spoke, the buck tumbled headlong to the ground; but the doe seemed to Thure to run only the faster and he felt sure that he had missed her. For a hundred yards she bounded along, as if untouched, then, all of a sudden, her four legs seemed to give out at the same instant and down she went. Thure afterward found that his ball had passed through her heart.

Here was meat for all; and Fremont at once commanded a halt; and, in an astonishingly short time, a goodly part of those two deer was giving

comfort to their empty stomachs. When all had satisfied their hunger, the journey was resumed.

Game for the next few days was very scarce; but the hunters succeeded in killing enough to keep them going; and, although they often went hungry, they were not compelled, to Thure's great inward satisfaction, to eat mule meat.

They were now in the Upper Sacramento Valley, and hurrying southward as fast as their wearied horses could carry them.

"If we have good luck," Rex told Thure one night, as they lay in their blankets, "we'll get to Peter Lassen's Fort to-morrow; and then we will know something about what has been going on in California. I hope it is war, because California can never amount to much while she is in the grip of Mexico; but if Uncle Sam once gets his hands on her he will make things hum."

"That is what father says," Thure answered. "Oh, I hope everything is all right at home! You know father has been having a little trouble with a bad Mexican, and he might get extra ugly, now that there is almost sure to be war between the United States and Mexico."

"Don't take a war tew make a Mexie extra ugly, he was born that way," broke in Ham, who lay on a blanket near by smoking. "I've knowed Mexies since I was elbow high tew my grandmother, an' I never knowed anything but pure cussedness tew make one ugly. I reckon they gits thar cussed-

ness, same as they do thar black skins an' ha'r, from thar dads an' mas. But 'twill take more'n an ugly Mexie tew git th' best of Noel Conroyal an' Steeltrap Smith. 'Scuse me for callin' your dad accordin' tew his old name," and Ham waved his pipe in the direction of Rex, "but, somehow, it don't come nateral tew call him Holt, a'ter knowin' him so long as Steeltrap Smith."

"I love the old name," Rex declared, "and I like to hear his old trapper friends call him by it. It brings to my mind the old times when Dill and I were out on our great hunt for Kit Carson; and—and when I found father," he added in a lower tone. "I shall never forget that day at the Old Mission of San Rafael, when that good old priest, Brother Juan, tore the sleeve off Steeltrap Smith's arm and, pointing to the tattoo marks on it, almost yelled in his great joy, 'My boy, my boy, this is your father!' Alas, the good old man is dead now!" and the face of Rex saddened; and for the remainder of that night Thure could not get another word out of him.

The next morning all were in high spirits, because it was expected that night would find them in camp at Peter Lassen's rancho or fort, as it was sometimes called. They were like sailors about to enter a friendly port after a long and dangerous voyage. For some two months they had been wandering through the wilds of a virgin wilderness, without the sight of a friendly face or the sound

of a friendly voice, save their own, with cunning and cruel Indians constantly on the watch to rob and murder; fighting nearly every mile of the way; with little food, except that killed by their rifles; often compelled to go hungry; unsheltered, save by their clothes and blankets and the trees of the forests, from the winds and the cold and the storms of the mountains;—no wonder that even these hardy men looked forward joyously to a return to some of the ruder comforts and securities of civilization.

Thure, whenever the cavalcade reached the summit of an eminence that afforded a view of the country ahead of them, strained his eyes for a first glimpse of the longed-for haven; and, at last, when the sun was nearing the tops of the western mountains, his eyes were rewarded, and, a couple of miles or more away, he saw, in the midst of a pleasant little valley, the low buildings of Peter Lassen's rancho.

"Come on. We'll ride on ahead along with Fremont and Carson," and Rex, striking spurs into his horse and followed by Thure and Ham, galloped after Fremont and Carson, who were already hurrying toward the rancho.

Peter Lassen and his men welcomed Captain Fremont and his companions almost with opened arms, although it was plain to be seen that their sudden return from out the great northern wilderness into which they had vanished some two months

before, caused great surprise and gave rise to many startling conjectures as to what it might mean. Every possible hospitality that the place afforded was freely bestowed upon them. Fat cattle, from the herds on the surrounding plains, were roped and butchered; coffee and sugar and other delicacies, from the storerooms of the rancho, were supplied; and a great feast prepared to gladden the stomachs of the hungry men; and, when all the feasting and the talking and the story telling and the smoking was over, the men rolled themselves up in their blankets, and, for the first time in many weeks, lay down to sleep with well-filled stomachs and with the assurance that the dread war-whoops of their red enemies would not disturb their slumbers.

CHAPTER IX

SHOOTING THE ANTELOPE

THE first thing Thure thought of the next morning was home. A couple of days of hard riding would bring him there; and, now that he was so near, it did not seem possible for him to await the slow advance of Fremont and his men to take him there. Besides, he knew that it was the intention of Fremont to remain at Lassen's for a few days to recruit his men and horses; and then to journey southward as far as the Buttes, a well-known camping-place near the junction of the Rio de las Plumas with the Sacramento River, and again go into camp here; and he did not fancy this slow progress at all. He was anxious to get back to the home ranch as speedily as horse legs could carry him. Two months seemed like a very long time to a boy, who never before had been away from home longer than a couple of days at a time; and he really was a little fearful of what might have happened to those he loved at home during his absence. He could not get the bad Mexican, with whom his father had had trouble, out of his head; and, when he thought of the cause of that trouble, he shuddered even now.

He was a petty officer, named Padilla, this Mexican; and one day, when he had stopped at his father's rancho to rest during the noon heat, his horse, as he dismounted, had become suddenly frightened and had stepped on one of his feet; and the Mexican, white with rage, was in the midst of giving the horse the most unmerciful and cruel beating that Thure had ever seen a horse receive, when his father, Noel Conroyal, had strode out of the house, from a window of which he had witnessed the whole affair, and, going up to the infuriated Mexican, had laid his hand on his shoulder and had told him to quit licking that horse.

Padilla at this had whirled about, his teeth showing like a growling cur's, and with a furious Mexican oath had bid him mind his own business, or he would turn the whip on him and lash him till he squealed like the American hog that he was. The next instant he had found himself lying on his back in the dust, sent there by Noel Conroyal's fist. Like a cat he had leaped to his feet, drawn his knife and had jumped at the American—to find himself looking into the muzzle of Noel Conroyal's pistol.

"Drop that knife, and get on that horse, and ride off this ranch, sudden, you skunk!" had come the commands from Conroyal's tight-drawn lips; "or I'll muss up my front yard with your dirty brains."

There was no doubting the look in the eyes behind that pistol; and Padilla, showing his teeth,

wolf-like, and with eyes glaring as green as the eyes of an angry cat, had mounted his horse and galloped away from the Conroyal rancho, swearing vengeance by all the gods of Mexico.

That had happened six months ago; and since then, in many petty ways, the Conroyals had been made to feel the wrath of the Mexican officer. But now, this talk of war between the United States and Mexico might have given him the opportunity to wreak a more terrible vengeance; and Thure shuddered at the thought of his father or mother or sister or anyone dear to him falling into the cruel hands of Padilla, and his anxiety to get home became stronger than ever.

Then, he wished to be the first to bear the good news of Fremont's return and what it might portend to the little settlement of Americans where his father lived. He knew that the presence of the American officer and his armed men would give comfort and assurance to all, and that all would rejoice at the thought of the possibility of their beautiful home land becoming a part of the United States.

Thure swiftly considered all of these things, as he hurried through his morning's camp duties; and quickly came to the conclusion that the need of his getting home was so imperative that he could not wait the slow march of Fremont and his men; and he determined to start at once, if possible.

"Rex," he demanded eagerly, the moment he saw

his cousin, "why can't you and Ham and I start for home at once, this very morning? It is only a couple of days' ride from here, and our own horses are in good shape, and we can make it without any trouble. Why must we wait for Fremont? It might be a couple of weeks before he gets much nearer. I heard him talking with Lieutenant Gillespie and Lassen last night, and he said that he might remain near here for a week or two, resting up and—and 'getting the feel of the situation,' he called it. It don't seem as if I could wait that long, now that we are so near home. I am sure, if you would explain how it is to Fremont and ask him, he would let us go. And Dad and Dill and Uncle Frank would be so pleased to see you both."

"Th' boy's right. Thar ain't no need of waitin'," and Ham, who had come up just in time to hear Thure's plea, turned to Rex. "Fremont won't need us for a week or two; or, if he does, 'twon't take him long tew git us; so, I reckon, he'll let us go all right. An' I'd like mighty well tew see Con an' Steeltrap—'scuse me, I mean Frank Holt and your dad. Come on. Let's go an' ask him right now; an' we can git started in an hour."

They found Fremont in consultation with Kit Carson and Lieutenant Gillespie and Peter Lassen; and, after he had heard their request and the reasons for it, he readily granted Rex and Ham a couple of weeks absence, with the understanding

that they were to hurry back to him at once, should hostilities begin before that time.

"Now, both of you, keep your eyes and ears open," he cautioned, as he was about to bid them good-by; "and, if you see or hear anything that you think I ought to know, don't spare horse flesh in getting to me. Lassen tells me that the air from the south is full of rumors of what General Castro is doing or is going to do; and I do not wish to be caught napping. I expect to remain here for a few days, and then to move on south as far as the Buttes and go into camp there. Let the Americans understand that I am ready to protect them in all their rights, as far as it lies within my power. Give my greetings to your father, Thure, and tell him that I am counting on him and the other good Americans in the Valley to stand by the flag, if there is need."

"Oh, they'll do that! Every one of them that has got any grit!" and Thure's face flushed and his eyes lighted.

"I am sure they will, if they are at all like you, my boy," and Fremont smiled. "Now, I must wish you a safe journey," and, with a warm clasp of the hand of each, he bade them, "go as soon as you like and as fast as your horses' legs can take you."

In less than an hour after parting with Captain Fremont, our three friends had said good-by to their comrades, and, mounted on their horses, were

galloping southward over the long level of the valley.

The day was warm and clear. Not even the suggestion of a cloud hung in the deep blue of the sky. There was a feel of buoyance in the air, as it pressed against the warmth of the body and was drawn into the welcoming lungs that sent the blood rejoicing through the veins and cleared the brain, like a clean wind sweeping through a dusty house.

There was no road for them to follow. They had only to ride southward, over the smooth level of the valleys, up and down the gently rolling hills, through the clear, cool waters of the mountain streams and across the rougher outcroppings of rocks, choosing their way as they listed, like the wild deer and the buffalo.

All the country around them lay just as made by nature; and it was all very beautiful, all in perfect harmony with the azure of the sky and the feel of the buoyant air. To the eastward the valley rose in gentle, grass-covered swells or rough, rock-strewn terraces to the granite-anchored bases of the mighty mountains of the Sierra Nevada, night-capped with the snows of an eternal winter. Westward towered the less lofty and rugged mountains of the Coast Range. And from each of these mountain ranges, at intervals, like the outstretched fingers of a gigantic hand, projected, far down into the valley below, huge fingers of rock,

gloved with mighty forests. Between these towering ramparts of rocks, wound and curved and swayed the valley, sometimes widening out for many level miles, again narrowing down until rampart almost met rampart; and through the midst of the valley flowed the Sacramento River, its waters constantly augmented by the hundreds of rivulets, that, dashing down the mountain sides and murmuring through the valley, hurried to its welcoming bosom.

The level of the valley and the sloping hillsides were carpeted with the greenest of grasses, interwoven with ribbons and clusters of blue lupine, golden buttercups, white lilies and dainty harebells, and spangled with beds of the purple larkspur and the bloom of the thistle and the gold of the mustard and the red of the rose, until it looked, sometimes, as if they were riding through the fairyland of gardening. Frequent groves of venerable oaks, bearded like old men with flowing moss of silver-gray, of mandrona-trees and of sycamores, garnished with mistletoe, and of other trees, gathered, like picnicking crowds, along the banks of the streams and spotted the valleys, giving a pleasing variety to the scene and offering a cool retreat from the heat of the sun.

And all this beauty and lightness and brightness was framed in on both sides by the dark green of the mighty forests, creeping up the mountain sides to the timber line, and the dull gray of the stark

naked rock and the white of the snow, showing against the blue of the sky.

Here and there in the valleys fed herds of elk and deer and half-wild cattle and antelope, gazing curiously at them from a safe distance, or scurrying swiftly away, if the horsemen approached too near. Bands of wild horses, frequently numbering hundreds, roamed over the soft level of the plain-like valleys; and, sometimes, one of these bands, more curious than the others or captained by a more daring leader, would charge furiously down toward our three horsemen, only to turn and circle wildly about them, with a great blowing of nostrils and pawing of feet and tossing of heads, as if they were trying to show their saddle-ridden brethren how free and joyous was the life they were living, unrestrained by bit and untouched by spur or whip or saddle. Rabbits leaped up out of the grass from the ground almost under their horses' feet, and, bounding away for a few rods, stopped, and sitting up on their haunches turned and watched them curiously. Now and then a coyote skulked away through the grass ahead of them, or they caught a glimpse of the tawny skin of a mountain lion vanishing in a near-by thicket, or they saw the huge grizzly bear, monarch by right of strength and courage and ferocity of all these valleys and forests and mountains, stalking the deer or the elk or searching the ground for mice and ground-squirrels, all alike welcomed to his

voracious appetite. Larks and robins and the tufted quail and other birds rose in flocks in front of them from the fields of wild oats, as their horses pushed their way through their luxuriant growth; and sang and warbled in the trees of the many groves.

Such was the beautiful Sacramento Valley in the spring time, before the plow or the ax had scarred its surface, before human life had driven the wild life from its confines, before the bear and the deer and the other game animals had come to know and to fear the deadly rifle. Try and imagine the wild beauties of the scene. It is the only way you can see it now. Never again will the Indians and the deer and the elk and the antelope wander in unmolested freedom here. Never again will the hungry grizzly bear and the panther hunt in its forests and thickets and tall grasses. Think of the picture then, as Thure and Rex and Hammer Jones rode down the valley. Think of the picture now, with its teeming thousands, with its populous cities, its splendid farms. And then think that only a little over sixty years, less than the span of one man's lifetime, separates that then from this now. No wonder the American boy is proud of his country, of the achievements of his fathers! It is a wondrous story of pluck and courage and endurance and enterprise stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific; and some of its most interesting pages are those which our friends are here and

now helping to write in this beautiful California land.

"No wonder we Californians love our land," Thure cried, as the little party halted on the brow of a small hill in the midst of one of these beautiful scenes, to give their horses a breathing space, and his eyes wandered over the delightful picture that lay all around him. "I do not believe there is another country as pleasant to live in as this is in all the world. And to think that nearly all of it is enjoyed by the Indians and the wild beasts; that the Spaniards and the Mexicans have lived here for over a hundred years, and yet this glorious land is still almost a wilderness! Why, the Americans have marched across a continent, while the Mexicans have been settling the coast of California!"

"God sure did make this country when He was feelin' good," Ham declared reverently, as his eyes slowly roamed over hill and valley and forest and mountain; "but He sure did make a mistake when He turned it over tew th' Mexies, unless it war jest for them tew hold it virgin till th' United States got ready tew take it. 'Pears like that's 'bout th' reasonin' on it. But, I reckon, we'd better be a-joggin' on now."

All that day our friends rode steadily southward, never stopping, except to breathe their horses, and allowing deer and elk and antelope and bear to pass unchallenged by rifle bullet. They could kill

their food when night came; and, in those days of the single-shot muzzle-loading rifles, few hunters cared to venture unnecessarily into a contest with the ferocious grizzly. Thure, certainly, had no desires to again try his lasso on one. Even when Ham pointed out to him a particularly large and ugly-looking specimen, busily turning over stones in search of the life beneath, and suggested that he go and lasso him, Thure failed to respond. Like Beauty, he had had all the grizzly bear lassoing he cared for just at present. A little before sundown they came to a mountain rivulet, flowing swiftly on its way to the Sacramento, with its banks fringed with trees.

"We will camp here," and Ham pulled up his horse and jumped off his back. "We've made half th' distance tew Conroyal's sart'in. Anyway th' hosses have done all they otter. Now, jest as soon as I take care of my hoss, I'll see if I can't git one of them antelope yonder," and he indicated with the barrel of his rifle the lower end of the little valley in which they had stopped, where a number of antelope were feeding. "Nuthin' like th' tender meat of a young antelope tew satisfy a hungry man. 'Cordin' tew my stummik, th' sweetest an' juiciest meat that grows on four legs."

"Please, can't I go after the antelope?" and Thure's eyes sparkled with eagerness. "I have often hunted them, and I am sure I can get one."

Before either man answered their eyes carefully scanned the surrounding valley on all sides, then Ham turned interrogatively to Rex.

"I reckon it's safe," he said. "Thar ain't no Injines in these parts, an' he'll be in sight all th' time."

"All right," and Rex turned to the eager boy. "You can go; but be sure and get one of the antelopes, or we are likely to go to bed hungry to-night."

"An' git a young one," Ham called after him, as Thure started off. "One 'bout half-grown'll make th' best eatin', an' don't start foolin' with no grizzly b'ar."

"Not if I see the bear first," Thure laughed back, as he hurried on.

The antelopes were, perhaps, three-quarters of a mile away; and, as usual, two or three of their number were stationed on the summits of the highest ground in their vicinity to act as sentinels. Thure had often hunted the antelope and knew that these watchful sentinels would give the alarm long before he got within rifle-shot, unless he advanced with the utmost caution. But he also knew that an antelope is an exceedingly curious little animal, and he knew, too, the way to take advantage of this curiosity, so as to draw them within range of his rifle; and it was this knowledge that he expected would enable him to get his supper that night, rather than his skill at stalking.



THURE GENTLY WAVED THE RAMROD BACK AND FORTH

First he was careful to get where the wind would not blow his scent to their sensitive nostrils, then he began walking slowly toward them, keeping watchful eyes on the sentinels. There were no trees or shrubs between him and the timid animals, behind which he might conceal his advance, and he was obliged to approach them openly. Consequently, before he had covered half of the necessary distance, the sentinels lifted their heads and stared wonderingly at him. Thure instantly crouched down in the grass, until he was entirely hidden from their eyes. Then he drew the ramrod from his rifle and tying a piece of red flannel, which he had brought with him for that purpose, to one end of the ramrod, he slowly raised it above his head and began waving it gently back and forth.

"Now, I wonder what that queer waving red thing can be," the antelopes appeared to be saying to themselves, as they watched the flutterings of this little red flag. "It surely needs looking into. Come, let us investigate. It looks interesting." And a large stag, followed at intervals by the other stags and the does and the fawns, began a halting advance toward the object of their curiosity.

Nothing happening, except that the red thing continued to wave, their courage and curiosity increased and they advanced even more boldly, the largest stags still in the lead.

Thure, as he watched them slowly drawing nearer from his covert in the grass, with difficulty

kept from laughing at the ludicrous gravity with which all went through exactly the same movements and almost at the same time as did the leading stags in their timid circling advance, with their funny little starts of astonishment and short stops of caution. He admired the beauty of their forms and the grace of their movements; and thought what a pity it was to be obliged to kill one of the harmless little animals. But, situated as he was, it was starve or kill this or some other animal; and, consequently, these feelings of pity did not keep him from raising his rifle, when at last the antelopes came within range.

The antelopes were now within short rifle-range, and very carefully Thure stuck one end of the ramrod into the ground by his side and brought his rifle to his shoulder, as his eyes selected the particular antelope he wished to shoot, a half-grown buck that appeared to fulfil Ham's injunctions perfectly. Swiftly his eye glanced along the rifle barrel; and then, at the moment the sights showed that his aim was true, his finger pressed the trigger.

At the report of the rifle, all the antelopes buck-jumped, bounded straight up into the air several times, and then stood staring stupidly in the direction whence the shot had come, all except the one Thure had shot at and he fell to the ground after the first quick jump. It was not until Thure sprang from the grass with a shout and rushed toward

them, that they took fright and leaped off, their bodies bobbing up and down so rapidly and their legs moving so swiftly that they seemed not to touch the ground, but to skim over its surface like birds. In a minute, so great was their speed, they were out of rifle-shot.

The antelope Thure had shot was dead by the time he reached him; and, throwing his plump body over his shoulders, the carcass did not weigh over thirty-five pounds, he started back to camp, where he found Ham and Rex already had a fire blazing, ready for the broiling of the flesh.

CHAPTER X

THE RINGING OF THE ALARM BELL

THE next morning Rex and Ham and Thure resumed their journey southward as soon as it became light enough to see their way. All were anxious to reach the Conroyal rancho as speedily as possible; and they hoped, by starting early and by riding hard, to get there some time that afternoon.

“Dad and Uncle Frank will be surprised to see us,” Thure said, as they were galloping along early in the afternoon, “because they did not expect us back so soon; and I know that both of them will be glad to hear that Fremont has returned to see that the Americans in California are treated right. I do hope that everything has gone all right at home; but, somehow, the nearer I get the more anxious I become. If it were not for that Mexican, Padilla, I would not feel so; but I know that he would stop at nothing to harm Dad; and, now that this trouble has come up between the Mexicans and the Americans, he might trump up some charge against dad to get him arrested and in his power. That is what I am afraid of. He would not dare

face dad, unless he was backed by a lot of Mexican soldiers," and Thure's eyes flashed.

"Reckon 'twouldn't be none healthy for his hide if he did," Ham declared emphatically. "Con's got a fist like a pile driver, an' thar ain't many men that can git th' start of him with a gun. Wal', we'll know afore long now. We must be gittin' somewhar nigh Con's."

"We are. Hurrah!" shouted Thure; for at that moment they had reached the top of a little hill, and the boy's face had lighted up the instant his eyes had rested on the valley beyond. "That is Tom Watson's rancho," and he pointed to a cluster of low buildings that crowned the flat top of a small hill a couple of miles away; "and Dad's is only five miles beyond, just a little ways the other side of that ridge of rocks over there," and he indicated a rocky rise of ground a couple of miles to the south of them. "That ridge is called the Old Sow's Back, and it divides Dad's rancho from Watson's, and we can see Dad's from the top of it. Hurrah! Come on," and the excited boy struck spurs into his horse and galloped down the hill toward the ridge, anxious to get that first glimpse of home as quickly as possible.

Ham and Rex, although they had said little, were as anxious as was Thure himself to reach the Conroyal rancho and learn what had happened there during their absence. They knew the cruel and

revengeful nature of Padilla even better than did Thure, and feared greatly that the present American-Mexican imbroglio might have given him the opportunity his cruelty and vengeance desired. Consequently there was no slackening of the speed of the horses until the foot of the Old Sow's Back was reached, when they were compelled by the steepness of the ascent to draw rein and walk their horses to its top.

Thure was the first to reach the summit; and, the moment that he did so, his eyes turned anxiously, almost fearfully, in the direction where he knew the home buildings should be and a glad cry came from his lips.

"Hurrah!" he yelled back to Ham and Rex, turning in his saddle and grabbing his hat off and swinging it around his head. "The old home is still there and everything looks all right. Why, I can see the smoke curling above the ranch house. Yes, and—and—but—hark!" and his face paled suddenly. "That sounds like the alarm bell! It is the alarm bell! And it is never rung unless something terrible happens. Oh, what can it mean?" and he turned a very white and a very anxious face to Rex and Ham, who now sat on their horses by his side, staring with troubled eyes at the distant ranch buildings.

The house of Noel Conroyal stood on the summit of a flat-topped hill, around whose base circled a small stream of water, known as Goose Creek,

which flows through the valley and some ten miles farther down empties into the Sacramento River. In front of the house was an open space or court, and in the center of this court stood a strong pole, to the top of which was fastened a large bell. From the back of the house straggled off a dozen low buildings, granaries, sheds, bunk-houses for the help, etc.

From where our friends sat on their horses they could hear this bell faintly, yet distinctly, ringing, and could see men running hither and thither among the buildings and hurriedly saddling and mounting horses, while from different parts of the valley they saw horsemen galloping, as fast as they could make their horses go, toward the Conroyal rancho. Already a little group of mounted men had gathered around the pole in the court in front of the house.

"Hurry!" and Thure's spurs dug wickedly into his horse's flanks. "The men are gathering and mounting. Something dreadful has happened, something that needs the help of every man. Hurry, or they will be off before we can get there!" and with tongue and spur he urged his tired horse as fast as he could go toward the distant ranch buildings.

"Wal, I'll be durned, if th' boy ain't right! Somethin' sart'in has stirred things up at Con's; an', I reckon, we'd better git tew see what it is as quick as th' Lord an' our hosses' legs will take

us," and Hammer Jones started after Thure, lashing his horse with one end of the lasso that hung to the pommel of his saddle.

Rex had said nothing; but the instant his ears had heard the alarm bell and his eyes had seen the hurrying and the mounting of the men, his face had whitened with apprehension and his fingers had tightened about his rifle; and, at the moment Thure had dashed off, he had set spurs into his horse, and now the two were rushing along side by side, with Ham coming on splendidly a few feet in the rear.

The distance from the top of the Old Sow's Back, where our friends had started, to the ranch buildings was not over two miles, and the greater part of the way was over the flat level of the valley. Never did tired horses cover an equal distance more speedily; yet, before they had gone a mile, Thure saw a dozen or more horsemen dash away from the pole, where the bell was still ringing, and gallop off swiftly to the southward, a man on a great black horse in the lead.

"That's Dad on Bilboa!" he cried excitedly, partly turning in his saddle so as to face Rex. "Yell! Holler! See if we cannot make them understand that we are coming! We must go with them!" and the anxious boy halloed and the two men yelled at the top of their voices and all three swung their hats in a vain effort to attract the attention of the

horsemen, who rode on swiftly without a glance in their direction.

"Well, if we can't go with them, we can go after them," Thure declared pluckily, as he settled down in his saddle. "I'd give almost anything to know right at this moment what the matter is. What do you think it can be, Rex?"

"I am doing no guessing now. I am seeing how quick I can get to that crowd around that pole," Rex answered shortly, never even turning his face toward Thure, but keeping his eyes fixed on the excited group of men and women that still clustered about the pole in front of the house.

Thure said no more, but, as he urged his horse on, his mind was busy considering the terrible conjectures that rushed one after another through his head.

"It can't be Dad," he reasoned, "because I am sure that was Dad I saw on Bilboa. It might be mother or Iola!" and he shuddered at the thought of harm coming to his mother or young sister. "Maybe it is an Indian outbreak. Maybe the Mexicans are marching against the Valley. Oh, it is terrible to know that something dreadful has happened and not be able to tell at once what it is!"

By now our friends were drawing near to the little cluster of people gathered around the pole. They could see that it was made up only of women and children and a few old men. Not an able-

bodied man was there. All appeared to be greatly excited, and the eyes of all were turned anxiously in the direction of the body of horsemen galloping southward, so that not one of them saw the approach of the three horsemen from the north, until they came pounding into their very midst.

Thure was the first to reach the pole; and, with the cry of, "Mother, mother, what has happened?" he flung himself off his panting horse and sprang into the arms of a weeping, disheveled, almost hysterical woman.

"Thure! My boy!" and his mother's arms were around his neck and her kisses and tears were on his cheek. "The Mexicans—Padilla—Iola—My daughter, my little girl! O merciful God, keep her from all harm!" and the distraught woman became incoherent with violent sobbing and wildly hysterical ejaculations, while Thure tried in vain to comfort her and to get some definite information as to what had occurred.

Rex, the moment he sprang off his horse, strode up to an old Mexican servant, known as Pedro, and seized him by the shoulder.

"What has happened?" he demanded, swinging the man around so suddenly that his hat was whirled off his head. "Tell me, Pedro, at once; and don't waste any words in the telling."

"Señor, señor, I know not, only it is something terrible," and the man's whole body trembled. "Not half an hour ago the señorita's pony came

galloping wildly up to the house-door, and the señorita was not on her back, and the señor, her father, he go quick to the pony's side, and he find, tacked to the pommel of the saddle, a bit of white paper with writing on, and he tear off the paper and read the writing, and he swear, *santissima*, but he swear big! and he jump for the bell rope, and he ring the great bell, and he shout for men and horses and guns. I, an old man, cannot longer ride and shoot, and no one had words for me. I know not what has happened, only it is something terrible, and the señorita was not on the back of her pony. I know not what words were on the white paper, only they were terrible words. I long have served Señor Conroyal, but never saw him look like when he read those terrible words written on the white paper before; and the señora, when she read, she scream and fall, like one dead, to the ground. Señor, señor, I know not what has happened, only it is something terrible. I, an old man—"

Rex abruptly unloosened the grip of his hands on the old man's shoulders and whirled about.

"A fresh horse! Two fresh horses!" he shouted. "Here, you, Juan, Pio, Miguel, two of the fastest horses left. Shake your lazy bones. Quick, here with the horses," and he turned to a number of white-faced, half-grown, Mexican lads, who stood huddled together in a trembling group, their dark eyes fairly sparkling with excitement.

"Three horses! Bring three horses!" and

Thure tore himself from his mother's arms. "I am going, too. It is my own sister, who is in peril. Mother," and again his arms were around his mother's shaking form, "God is surely good. He will surely keep Iola from all harm until Dad comes. Come, let me help you into the house, to your couch. Yes, by the window, where you can get the first sight of us on our return. We will have Iola riding in the lead, so that the first one you will see will be Iola. Surely Dad and Uncle Frank will find her! And now we have Rex and Hammer Jones to help us! Do you hear, mother, we have Rex and Hammer Jones to help us! Come, I will help you into the house," and very gently and very tenderly, for his heart was deeply touched by the agony of his mother, he half-led and half-carried Mrs. Conroyal, assisted by Rex, into the house, and, placing her on a couch near the window, where she could see all who approached the house, he whispered words of cheer and comfort into her ears, kissed her lovingly and hurriedly left the room.

Outside Thure found Rex and Ham already transferring their saddles and bridles from their own tired beasts to the backs of the fresh mounts which the Mexican boys had brought with commendable quickness, and his own saddle and bridle going on to the back of a third horse as swiftly as the hands of two of the lads could place them. In two minutes more the three were in the saddles on the backs of their fresh horses.

"Take good care of mother," Thure called, as he gripped his bridle rein and whirled his horse about.

"Jest keep right ahind me," Ham directed, his eyes for an instant glinting into Thure's face. "Rex an' me'll follow your dad's trail, an' all you got tew do is jest tew follow us. Git up!" and, with a savage blow of his Mexican riding whip, he wore no spurs, his horse sprang away along the trail of the body of horsemen that now had disappeared from sight over a rocky ridge far to the south; and close by his side rode Rex and close behind him followed Thure.

Little was said on that ride, save to the horses. Each was busy with his own thoughts. Then, it was now within an hour of sundown, and they must, if possible, overtake Conroyal and his men before dark; and to do this they must ride their horses at their utmost speed, and no one cares to talk when riding a horse at full speed. When they reached the top of the rocky ridge, over which Conroyal and his men had disappeared, they saw them just vanishing in among the foot-hills to the east. The trail had turned mountainward, as they had feared it would.

"We must git 'em afore dark, or we might miss 'em in th' mountains," Hammer Jones said, as they pounded down the other side of the ridge.

"We will get them," and Rex's lips set tight across his teeth; "and we will get them to-night."

They showed their horses no mercy. Across the

level of the valley and in among the foot-hills they rode, as fast as spur and whip and voice could make their horses go.

The sun had now nearly reached the tops of the western mountains. A few minutes more of daylight was all that they had left. The road became rough and, sometimes, dangerous for fast riding; but they gave no heed to its roughness, no thought to its dangers. And at last, just as it was beginning to get too dark to see clearly, Hammer Jones, who was in the lead, gave a great shout, as he swung round the point of a huge promontory of rocks that had shut out their view beyond.

"We've got 'em," and he turned a glad face back toward Rex and Thure. "I seen th' hind one on 'em ride over that ridge jest as I rounded this p'int of rocks. They're not more'n a quarter of a mile ahead of us. Git up! Shake loose your old bones!" and, with whip and voice, he strove to get a little more speed out of his horse.

When they reached the top of the ridge, all gave a glad shout; for there, not eighty rods away, were Conroyal and his men galloping across the level of a small valley. They heard the shout and turned in their saddles. Rex and Ham and Thure swung their hats and shouted louder than ever; and the cavalcade ahead slowed down and waited for them to catch up.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE DEVIL'S TRAIL

NOEL H. CONROYAL was a large man, almost as broad and tall as was Ham himself; and, as he sat on his great black horse, Bilboa, awaiting the approach of our friends, no one, as they looked at his vigorous form, his clear eyes, his rugged face and hair still almost untouched by the hoary hand of age, would have credited him with the sixty years that he had lived.

By his side, on a fine horse, sat a broad-shouldered, splendidly-built man, with long hair as white as the snow on the tops of the mountains, and a smooth-shaven face that instantly held the eyes by its strength and nobility and a look that seemed to tell of great suffering heroically endured. This was Frank Holt, the father of Rex and the brother-in-law of Noel Conroyal, known for many years to the trappers and hunters of the Rocky Mountains as Steeltrap Smith, the man who had been captured and tortured by the Blackfeet Indians and had escaped, but only after the horrors of his suffering had been so great that, when he recovered, he had lost all remembrance of his former life and had hunted and trapped and fought Indians for

many years without having the least idea of who he really was. And the dramatic story of how he had recovered his memory and lost personality at the little Mission of San Rafael had been told around many a blazing camp-fire.

A little back of him, on an iron-gray stallion, sat a black-haired and dark-eyed young man, whose close resemblance to Thure, notwithstanding the difference in their ages, at once told of their near relationship. They were brothers; for this was Dill Conroyal, the man who, when a boy, had made that famous journey with Rex Holt half across a continent in search of Kit Carson, a journey that had ended so dramatically in the finding of Rex's father in Steeltrap Smith.

In addition to these three men, there were a dozen American and Mexican vaqueros, all helpers on the Conroyal rancho. Each was armed with rifle and pistols and the ever present reata, and mounted on sturdy and swift California horses.

Thure rode straight to his father; and the hard lines on the stern face relaxed and the glow in the wrathful eyes softened, as he welcomed his youngest boy.

"Father, what has happened to Iola?" Thure asked the moment the warmth of the greeting was over.

"That Mexican dog, Padilla, has kidnapped her," and the angry light flashed back into his eyes and his face hardened. "Read that," and, thrusting

a hand into his pocket, he pulled out a bit of white paper and handed it to Thure. "I found it tacked to the pommel of Iola's saddle and the saddle empty."

Thure took the paper, and his face whitened and his hand trembled as he read:

"I had need of a servant and have taken your little girl. I will take her to Mexico and train her in the way a servant should go. You will never see her again."

"The cur! The—cowardly scoundrel! But, how do you know it is Padilla? The words are unsigned," and Thure turned a white anxious face to his father.

"How do I know it's Padilla? How do I know a bobcat by his snarl? a skunk by his scent? It's too devilish mean and cowardly for any other man's hand, Mexican or American. It don't need any signature. But," and the square jaws came together so strongly that the teeth ground audibly, "he'll never get to Mexico with her. Fortunately Little Dave, one of my vaqueros, saw the cursed Mexican bandits from a distance riding swiftly into the gully that leads to this valley, and so we've wasted no time in following their trail, but have come straight here. We can't be more than an hour behind them; and they can't know that we are so close behind; and, consequently, they won't ride so desperate fast and will likely go into camp early, knowing that it would have been impossible

for us to have trailed them this far into the mountains before dark; and we'll get them to-night. We've got to get them to-night!" and the grip on his rifle tightened. "No time for greetings now," and he turned to Rex and Ham; "but never were two good men more welcomed than you two are. Now—"

"Jest th' tail end of a minit," and Ham caught the rein of Bilboa, as his master whirled him around. "I know this valley. Thar's only one way out of it, except th' way we come in, an' that's through the Devil's Trail, a canyon more'n twenty miles long, with walls of rock that no Mexie that ever lived could climb, an' th' trail sometimes windin' round precipices so narrer an' unsart'in that even a mountain goat wouldn't dare foller it in th' dark. If they've gone in thar," and he pointed to a gash in the wall of mountains that surrounded the valley, "we've got 'em sart'in sure; an' I reckon I can tell within ten rods whar they'll camp, 'cause it's th' only spot of level ground big enough tew camp on in th' hull canyon. It's 'bout ten miles from here; an', if we go careful, we can s'prise th' devils; an', if we don't, they can s'prise us. Me an' Kit Carson an' Jim Bridger once got caught by 'bout a hundred Ingines in this valley an' were driven intew that canyon, an' I got th' scenery impressed some vivid on my mind."

"Good!" and there was a jubilant note in Con-

royal's voice. "You take the lead, Ham. But, let's be pushing on," and he headed his horse toward the entrance to the canyon.

Ham at once fell in by the side of Conroyal; and the little cavalcade started straight for the Devil's Trail, as the canyon was named in accordance with the picturesque and vivid nomenclature of the mountaineers.

Thure rode by the side of his brother, Dill; and, as they galloped along, he told, very briefly, how it happened that he and Rex and Ham had returned so unexpectedly and opportunely. "And we all think," he ended, "that Lieutenant Gillespie brought Captain Fremont secret orders from Washington to return to California, so as to be on the spot when the trouble started between the United States and Mexico. Indeed, we half-expected to find the two countries at war when we got back."

"It certainly does look as if that was the right explanation of Fremont's sudden return," Dill agreed; "and the air for the past month has been full of rumors of a war brewing between the United States and Mexico; but actual hostilities have not yet begun, or, if they have, word of the fighting has not yet reached California. But I do not believe Padilla would have dared to have run off with Iola, if he did not expect the trouble to start mighty soon, and give him a chance to get off under cover of the excitement. He knows nothing

short of a Mexican army could stop dad from following him clear to Mexico, if it were necessary. I—”

At this instant Thure uttered a sudden exclamation, and, leaping off his horse, ran to a bare spot of ground at the base of a large rock a few feet from the trail, and, bending quickly down, picked up something that glittered as he held it in his hand. His keen young eyes had caught its gleam, as he rode along.

“Dad! Ham!” he yelled, fairly dancing up and down with excitement. “Look here! See what I have found! Iola’s ring, the one I gave her her last birthday!” and he sprang to where his father and Ham had jerked up their horses, holding high in his hand a small circle of gold set with three iridescent opals.

“Bully for Iola! She’s a powerful knowin’ gal. Wal, we sart’in are on th’ right trail,” and Ham’s face showed the satisfaction the sight of this sign that the kidnappers of the girl had passed this way gave him.

Before he uttered a word Conroyal reached down and seized the ring and examined it closely.

“It is Iola’s ring,” he declared. “Thank God, we’ve made no mistake. They’ve gone in there certain; and we will get them,” and he struck spurs into his horse and dashed toward the mouth of the Devil’s Trail, now only a few rods distant.

For some five miles the bottom of the canyon af-

forded a smooth and solid roadway, between almost perpendicular walls of rock, over which Hammer Jones led the way almost at full speed. Then the walls came closer together and our horsemen were obliged to pick their way slowly and carefully along one side of the canyon, often over a narrow ledge with a precipice yawning hundreds of feet below them on one side. By this time, too, the sun had gone down behind the mountains, and, in the depths of the Devil's Trail, the blackness had become almost impenetrable to the eyes. They now rode in single file, moving with the utmost caution along the narrow ledges and hurrying more rapidly over the broader pathways, but never going faster than a walk. At last Ham dismounted and sent word back along the line for all to dismount and to lead their horses and to hug the wall of the canyon as closely as possible; for they were about to pass along a particularly narrow ledge, where a single misstep would hurl them over a precipice a thousand feet deep. He also cautioned all to move as silently as possible and not to speak a loud word, for they were nearing the spot where he believed the Mexicans would camp, and sounds carried far in the narrow confines of the canyon.

Thure walked directly behind Dill's horse and so close that he could touch the tail of the horse with his hand. It was an eery experience for a lad as young as he. The darkness was now so great that it was impossible for him to see even the horse not

two feet in front of him and he was compelled to feel his way along the wall of the canyon with one hand, while the knowledge of the hideous depths yawning only a few inches from his feet sent the cold shivers shooting up and down his back. He could not see, but he seemed to be able to feel the brink of the precipice and the black horrors below. Once the foot of his horse dislodged a large piece of rock. He heard the breaking loose of the stone, felt the start of his horse; and then came the death-like silence while the rock was falling and, a couple of minutes later, a far-away sound, like the blow of a great hammer miles away; and, for a brief moment, he trembled so that he could hardly stand.

They were all taking desperate chances, but the need was desperate; and not one of those brave men hesitated or faltered an instant, although each knew that a stumble in the darkness or a step an inch too far to one side would plunge him instantly into eternity.

For, perhaps, fifteen minutes they moved thus, through that awful silence and darkness and along that narrow ledge; and then the whispered word came back that they had passed the most dangerous part of the ledge and that all were to halt and to stand perfectly still where they were, while Ham crept forward to see if he could discover the camp of the Mexicans, which he expected to find round a bend in the canyon not more than half a mile away. Hammer Jones felt confident that the Mexicans

would not dream that any human being would have the hardihood to cross that narrow ledge in the pitchy blackness of the night and that, consequently, they would feel safe and keep little or no guard over their camp.

Never in all Thure's life did time pass so slowly as it did while he stood waiting in the darkness and silence of the Devil's Trail for Ham's return; but at last he felt a stir in front of him and then Dill in a low voice bade him move forward cautiously and told him that Ham had returned, and that all were to come close together for consultation.

"Did he—did he find the Mexicans?" and in spite of his utmost efforts Thure's voice trembled a little.

"Yes, they are in camp where he expected they'd be; and we must keep very still. We want to take them completely by surprise."

Silently, in the inky darkness, they all gathered around Ham, guided by his low voice. When he had assured himself that all were there, he told them that he had found the Mexicans camped, as he had expected he would, in a little widening of the canyon, where there was fuel for their fires and a little grass for their horses, about three-quarters of a mile farther up the canyon; and that they had built a large fire and were seated around it, smoking and eating and apparently unguarded. He could not tell exactly how many men there were, but he thought they numbered about fifteen; and all were well-armed. He had seen Iola. She was

lying on a blanket near the fire and did not appear to be bound. About a quarter of a mile from where they were the canyon made a turn, and, when they had rounded that turn, they could see the light of their camp-fire. A few scrubby trees grew here, and he thought it would be best for them to tie their horses to these trees and leave them there. If fortune favored them, he thought they ought to be able to creep up, unseen and unheard, to within short rifle-range of the camp; and that then, when the Mexicans discovered that they were at the mercy of their rifles, as they would be standing in the bright light of the fire, they doubtless would surrender without bloodshed, and they could capture them all.

"Now," and the deep voice of Hammer Jones lowered involuntarily, "me an' Con an' Steeltrap will go on ahead, an' three on you foller right ahind our hosses' tails, an' three more ahind their hosses' tails, an' so on till you're all in line; an' all on you be powerful keerful 'bout makin' any noise that might reach th' ears of th' Mexies, an' we'll give 'em a s'prise that'll jolt all th' courage right out of 'em," and Ham chuckled, as he gripped his bridle rein, and, with Conroyal on one side and Steeltrap, as he continued to call Frank Holt, the father of Rex, on the other, led the way slowly up the canyon.

The trail now ran along the bottom of the canyon, where there was no danger of falling over a preci-

pice; but, in those depths, the darkness was so great that it was impossible to see a foot in front of the face, and, in order to be sure of going right, each man gripped the long hairs of the tail of the horse in front of him with one hand, and thus all managed to follow their leaders closely through the inky blackness of the Devil's Trail. When they came to the turn in the canyon, they caught their first glimpse of the camp-fire of the Mexicans, its red light shining up brightly against the black walls of the canyon and showing that they had built an unusually large fire, doubtless feeling absolutely safe in the silence and darkness of their retreat, as they would have been had not Little Dave been so fortunate as to see them riding into the Valley of the Devil's Trail. They tied their horses to the trees that grew here, and then, still under the leadership of Ham and Conroyal and Holt, began to creep cautiously toward the red glow of the distant camp-fire.

Thure was tremendously excited; and yet so great was the self-control that his rough life in California had given him, that he showed little outward sign of his agitation. He had lived in a hard training-school for the past five years, where every man and boy was compelled to keep his wits, if he would keep the head the wits were in, no matter how exciting the circumstances might be; and now this training stood him in good stead, as the same kind of training even now will stand any boy in

good stead before he is through with life. He walked, or, rather, crept along directly behind Hammer Jones, with Rex on one side and Dill on the other and so close that they touched elbows; and so quietly did all move that not a sound of their moving broke the stillness of the canyon.

Some ten rods from the widening of the canyon where the Mexicans had pitched their camp, stood a little clump of trees. Into this grove Ham led the men, cautioning all to move with the utmost care, so as not to make a suspicious sound, and to station themselves behind trees, where each could get a clear shot at the men in the camp. When this had been done, the whispered command was passed for each man to noiselessly cock his rifle and to stand ready to shoot instantly at the word. Then Ham and Conroyal and Frank Holt drew their heads close together for a whispered final consultation.

From where he stood Thure could now plainly see the Mexicans around their camp-fire, could even hear their voices with sufficient distinctness to understand many of the words they uttered. Ham had been right in his count. There were fifteen men; and all were reclining carelessly on their blankets in a circle around the fire, smoking and talking and laughing and card-playing, as if the thought of sudden death was far from every mind. Iola still lay on a blanket a little apart from the men. As Thure looked, she slowly sat up and

stared around; and he could see, by the bright light of the fire, that her face was white and tear-stained, and the horror of the dreadful fear that looked out of her eyes.

A Mexican now arose from his blanket and stepped quickly to the side of Iola; and Thure gritted his teeth when he saw that the man was Padilla. In one hand he carried a small riding whip. He spoke to the girl. She looked up angrily into his face and shook her head. He raised the whip threateningly above her; and Thure felt all the blood in his body beginning to boil. Again the Mexican spoke and again the girl shook her head defiantly and again the whip was raised. Then came a startling interruption. A huge giant of a man stepped suddenly out from behind a rock, not three rods from where Padilla stood and where the bright light of the fire shone full upon him and leveled a long-barreled rifle straight at the astounded Mexican's head.

"Drop that whip an' hold up your hands sudden, every man of you," came the command. "That bunch of trees back of me is full of rifles an' everyone on 'em's got a dead-shot ahind it. Are you ready, men?"

"Ready!" came back a shout that made the walls of the canyon ring.

The whip dropped from Padilla's hand, and, at the sight of that leveled rifle, both hands shot above his head, and his face turned the color of yellow

chalk. The other Mexicans leaped to their feet; but, before a hand could pick up a rifle, the answering shout of, "Ready!" blanched every face and every hand went above its owner's head as if all were worked by one shaft of machinery. They were caught and absolutely at the mercy of the rifles hidden in the dark shadows of the clump of trees; and they were wise enough to know it.

Thure, in the excitement of watching Iola and Padilla, had not noticed that Ham had silently crept from the shelter of the trees and had glided swiftly yet cautiously up behind a large rock that stood only a few yards from the men around the camp-fire; and, consequently, he was almost as much startled by the sudden appearance of the huge deerskin-clothed man in the bright light of the fire, as were the Mexicans themselves. For an instant he had difficulty in believing he was Hammer Jones; but, by the time the question, "are you ready?" was asked, his rifle was to his shoulder and leveled at Padilla, and his voice rang out loudly with the others.

Ham now called on Rex and Dill to come forward and disarm and bind the Mexicans, while the rest were to keep them covered with their rifles.

This was pleasant work for Rex and Dill; and they did it so thoroughly that, in a very few minutes, every weapon had been taken from the Mexicans and the hands of each man tied tightly behind his back.

Iola, at the sudden appearance of Ham, had jumped to her feet, stood for an instant staring blankly at him; and then, with a cry of joy, had run toward him.

"Jest keep quiet, leetle one, 'till we 'tend tew these Mexies," cautioned Ham, never for an instant lowering his rifle or taking his eyes off Padilla; "then you can git intew your dad's arms as sudden as your legs'll take you."

And Iola, her face alternately flushing and paling, had stood quietly by the side of Ham, while the Mexicans were being disarmed and bound; but, the instant Rex and Dill signified that their task was completed, she uttered a glad cry and sprang away toward the clump of trees. At the same moment Conroyal, followed by Thure, rushed forward to meet her; and, in another moment, she was sobbing in her father's arms.

The Mexicans were gathered into a sullen group, where the bright light of the fire would show every motion they made, and a guard stationed over them. Then Conroyal, Hammer Jones, Frank Holt, Rex and Dill, with faces that showed how thoroughly the dastardly act of the Mexicans had aroused their wrath, met, in a group a little apart by themselves, to consider what fate should be meted out to Padilla and his men. Thure and Iola sat close together hand in hand on a rock a few feet from this group. They had always been very chummy, even for a brother and sister; and now it

seemed as if each had so much to tell the other that the telling could never be completed. Noel Conroyal's face was white and drawn. He had been compelled to exercise all of his self-control to keep from killing Padilla with his own hand.

"I have lived too long," he said, when the little group had gathered around him, "to give free reins to my wrath. If I did, I would string Padilla up to the nearest tree, and leave him there as a warning to all similarly inclined dastards, be they Mexicans or Americans. But he and the men with him must be punished, and punished in such a way that never, as long as they live, will any one of them feel like ever again committing such a cowardly crime. It would be useless to expect the Mexican authorities to give the full meed of punishment due them, now that they are already nearly at swords' points with us Americans, so that it would be vain to turn the wretches over to them. We must take their punishment into our own hands. God forbid that we should do aught in blind wrath or from the bitterness of our outraged manhood. Now, let us proceed to judge the prisoners, calmly and deliberately, as is befitting men who one day will stand before the All-wise Judge. Bring Padilla before us."

Rex and Dill at once hurried to the group of prisoners and returned with Padilla.

The Mexican's face was of the color of yellow chalk, and was wet with the sweat of fear, and his knees bent and quivered. He knew with what hor-

rors of torture he would slay, if he stood in the place of his judges; and his cowardly spirit cringed and shivered at the thought of the dreadful death that now surely would be his.

"You know this cur's crime, so there is no need of dwelling on that. What shall his punishment be?" and Noel Conroyal, his face white and his lips set very firmly across his teeth, turned to his comrades.

"I always kill a p'isen-snake, whenever I find one," Ham suggested grimly.

"No," and the word came very emphatically from between Conroyal's lips. "We will leave the manner of his death in the hands of his God. Yet we can not hold him and his men prisoners. We must punish them here and now."

"Then," and Ham's face hardened and his eyes glinted savagely, "seein' that thar's tew be no killin' an' no prisoner holdin', I reckon, thar's only one kind of punishment that'll fit that sneak and his men," and Padilla shrank from the glare in the eyes that were turned upon him; "an' that's floggin'."

"And taking and keeping all their weapons," added Rex.

"And their horses," suggested Dill.

"And leave them here in the Devil's Trail, after each has had his flogging, without a weapon or a horse, to find their way out as best they can. 'Tis the most fitting punishment for their crime this side

of hanging. I give my vote for it," and Frank Holt's eyes rested sternly on the cowering Mexican.

"Good. Let that be their punishment, then. But," and Noel Conroyal's eyes turned to the faces of his young son and daughter, as he added in a lower voice, "the scene will not do for the eyes of childhood. We will take them to the little grove of trees, where we left our horses."

A couple of men were now left with Thure and Iola; and the others, lighted by pine torches and driving the Mexicans before them, marched off ominously into the darkness of the canyon.

"What are they going to do with them?" and Iola's face whitened, as she watched the Mexicans led away. "I don't want them shot or hanged," and she started to jump to her feet.

"Sit down," and Thure caught hold of her hand and pulled her down by his side. "They are not going to kill them, bad as they deserve it. They are only going to flog them; and," he added, under his breath, "I hope they flog them good and hard. They deserve to be hanged, but dad won't allow it."

A couple of hours passed, to the two waiting children it seemed much longer; and then they saw the glow of approaching torches and a few minutes later the procession of captors and captives marched back into camp, the Mexicans white-faced and sullen-eyed and moving as if every step caused them agony. Padilla could hardly stand; and, the moment he reached the camp-fire, he sank down on the

ground, groaning and cursing and vowing vengeance on all Americanos.

"Keep that blackguard tongue still; or I'll ram a piece of your shirt down your dirty throat," Ham cautioned, stopping to glower down on the cowering man. "You ought tew have ben hanged by rights; but we bein' some civilized couldn't string up even a Greaser," and, bending down to see that his hands were still safely tied behind his back, he passed on.

Padilla glared after him, the venom fairly dripping from his eyes; but he did no more cursing, at least, not aloud.

All the horses had now been brought into camp; and, after consultation, it was determined to camp right where they were for the rest of the night and to wait until daylight before attempting to pass out of the canyon. 'Accordingly a guard was set over the Mexicans; and the others rolled themselves up in their blankets and were soon sound asleep.

Thure, now that the excitement was all over, found himself so thoroughly tired out, that, hardly had his head touched his saddle, when his eyes were shut and the excitements and perils of the day were lost in unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XII

IOLA

IOLA CONROYAL was now thirteen years old, and five of these years had been spent on her father's rancho in the beautiful Valley of the Sacramento, where she had lived the healthful outdoor life almost of one of her father's vaqueros. No boy in the Valley could ride a horse better than could she; and few of her boy friends could surpass her skill in shooting the rifle or throwing the riata. Her father was a thorough believer in the outdoor life for boy or girl; and Iola had been given the same outdoor training that Thure had had; and had played and rode and hunted and fished with him and his boy friends almost with the freedom of a boy. And yet a more sweet and loving little blossom of femininity than was Iola, from the witchery of her dark eyes to the lithe gracefulness of her perfectly healthy and supple little body, would have been difficult to find anywhere, no matter what the bringing up had been. She was not in the least boyish in her looks and acts, only she had lost much of a girl's timidity and squeamishness over little things, and could face danger and endure hardships as pluckily as could any boy.

Such was Iola; and, being such a girl, with such a training, her perilous experience with the brutal Padilla and his men had had no ill effects that a night's rest and sleep had not served to drive away; and, when morning dawned, all the roses and dimples were back in her cheeks, and her only anxiety was to get back to her mother as quickly as possible, so as to relieve the agonizing worry of the mother-heart that she knew would throb and ache with dreadful apprehensions until her safe return. Accordingly, the moment she awoke, she jumped up from her blanket and ran to her father, who was already saddling his horse.

"How long will it take to get to mother, dad?" she asked, as he caught her up in his arms to give her his morning's kiss. "I know she will be worrying terribly about me, and I want to let her know that I am safe and unharmed just as soon as possible."

"Four or five hours, possibly," and Conroyal set the girl down on her feet. "We will make the horses' legs fly, once we get out of the mountains and into the valley; for your mother sure was worrying some. Say, but your old dad's heart is singing with joy to have his little girl back in his arms and unharmed. Oh, but we will have a great celebration when we get home!" and he again caught her up in his arms, and hugged and kissed her until the hungering of the father-love was appeased. "We sure will kill the fatted calf!"

"And can Thure and I invite all our friends to help in the celebration?" and Iola's eyes began to dance and sparkle joyously. "Can we have a picnic in the beautiful grove near the Laughing Springs, with horse-racing and shooting contests and games and a big feast, and the fattest calf, dad, the fattest calf in the herd to roast?" The delighted girl was now fairly dancing up and down in front of her father.

"Yes, yes, you shall have all of that. I want everybody in the Valley to know how glad I am to get my little girl safe back."

"And a dance at night in the house-sala for the big folks, with Pedro's band to play the sweet music?"

"Yes, yes," again declared the happy father.

"Oh-h, you are the goodest dad a little girl ever had!" and, with a bound, her arms were around his neck and her kisses were telling him how much she loved him. But, the next moment, her arms slowly unloosened and her face sobered and tears came into her eyes. "And poor mama is suffering all this time, because she doesn't know what has happened to her little girl. Come, let us hurry home. I want to kiss mama and tell her how much I love her."

"We will start in five minutes," and the grim look came back on her father's face. "'That is your riding horse that Dill is saddling. Now run to him and get acquainted with the horse."

By this time the light of the morning had reached the bottom of the canyon; and everything was shortly made ready to start homeward. Iola, with Rex and his father riding ahead and flanked on either side by Thure and Dill, led the way down the canyon. Behind them came the men, each one of them leading one or more of the Mexicans' horses, with the captured weapons tied to their saddles. Noel Conroyal and Hammer Jones did not mount with the others. They had a little necessary business to transact before they left; and waited, standing by their horses' sides, their stern eyes on the little bunch of Mexican captives, until the cavalcade had passed from sight around a bend in the canyon. Then both men strode close up to the Mexicans, Conroyal stopping directly in front of Padilla.

"Padilla," he said, "because we are men, not brutes, we have spared your lives this time. But," and his face hardened and his eyes glinted, "if a like crime is again committed by you or any of your men here, we will know that our mercy was wasted and will kill you on sight, as we would poison-snakes. Ham, cut their bonds. I will stand guard," and, drawing his pistols from his belt and cocking them, he stood with one ready in each hand, while Ham, his hunting-knife in his hand, passed behind each man and severed the bonds that had bound his wrists together behind his back.

Padilla had started to speak; but, at his first word, Ham had doubled up his big fist and had

taken a step toward him, and the words had choked themselves into silence in Padilla's throat. That was sufficient. Not another Mexican attempted to utter a word; but all stood glowering sullenly from under their heavy eyebrows out of their black eyes at the two Americanos.

When the last bond had been cut, Conroyal pointed with one of his pistols up the canyon, the opposite direction from that which his men had taken.

"Go!" he said.

The Mexicans waited no second bidding; but, instantly, started up the canyon; and, as they hurried on their way, they cast furtive glances over their shoulders at the two stern-faced men who stood silently watching them. When they had gone a couple of hundred yards and just before they reached a bend in the canyon that would hide them from view, Padilla turned and, shaking his fists violently at them, hurled a volley of Mexican curses in their direction.

"Th' cowardly skunk! I knowed we otter have hanged him," and Ham with a quick movement, threw his rifle to his shoulder.

Padilla saw the motion and scuttled around the point of rocks, like a terrified rabbit.

"I knowed that would stop his cussin'," and, chuckling, Ham lowered his rifle.

Conroyal and Hammer Jones now mounted their horses and hurriedly rode down the canyon to where

Iola and Thure and the others had stopped to await their coming. As the two men rode up Iola eyed her father a bit apprehensively, as if she half expected to find his hands red with the blood of the Mexicans.

"You—you didn't do anything more to those Mexicans, did you, dad?" she asked, falteringly.

"Not a thing," he answered grimly, as he rode up close to her side. "Just cut their bonds and told them to get up the canyon; and they got. Now forget them yellow skunks. It's home for us now, just as fast as our horses' legs can take us there."

The trail now began to climb up along the side of the canyon, becoming narrower with every step advanced, until it was not possible for two horses to walk abreast over it; and presently they came to the narrow shelf of rock over which they had passed so cautiously in the darkness of the night before.

Thure shuddered, when he saw how narrow was this shelf and how high it hung above the bottom of the canyon. Even in the clear daylight, when every step could be cautiously guarded, it would be a fearful trail to follow; but, in the blackness of the night, when the eyes could not see two inches in front of them—Again Thure shuddered; and was very thankful that he had not known how close he was walking to the lip of the precipice of death that night when he crept along in the black darkness holding to the long hairs of the tail of the horse in front of him.

Fortunately all rode horses that were accustomed to mountain traveling and almost as sure-footed as were the mountain goats themselves; and the shelf was passed over in safety, although in places its width narrowed down to less than three feet and hung a good five hundred feet straight above the bottom of the canyon.

Now the way became easier, and soon they were galloping along over the rocky bottom of the Devil's Trail, and out into the little valley, and on through gullies and other small valleys and up and down rocky hillsides, until at last the mountains were left behind and only the rolling level of the Sacramento Valley lay before them.

Thure, true to his promise to his mother, when the last ridge that lay between them and the home-ranch was drawing near, galloped on ahead with Iola; so that, when the cavalcade came riding over the ridge, where it could be seen by the watchers at home, Iola would be the first to gladden the sight of their eyes.

"I think," Thure said, as they rode up the incline, "that, if you will be waving something when we ride down the other side, mother will know it is you and that you are safe, even if she can't recognize you so far. At least the waving will tell her that everything is all right with you."

"I will wave my mantilla and you can wave your hat and I will race you to the bell pole. The first one there to have the first hug and kiss from

mother," and the excited girl's face flushed and her eyes scintillated like black diamonds.

"Bully!" agreed Thure enthusiastically. "Your home-coming will be almost as joyful as was the return of the Prodigal Son. Now, get your mantilla ready. We're at the top."

At that moment they reached the summit of the ridge; and far off across the valley they could see the buildings of the Conroyal rancho. Iola quickly loosened her mantilla from around her neck and Thure caught off his hat.

"Now," cried the girl, tightening her grip on the bridle reins and settling herself down in her saddle, "I'll count three; and, at the word, three, the race begins. Are you ready?"

"Yes," answered Thure, taking a firm grip of the broad brim of his hat. "Let her go; but don't forget the waving."

"One, two, THREE!" shouted Iola; and they were off, the mantilla and the hat waving frantic circles in the air about their heads.

The distance from the top of the ridge to the bell pole in front of the house was some two miles; but both were mounted on sturdy California-bred horses, accustomed to long and fast riding; and, notwithstanding they had journeyed far that morning, they were still good for the two miles.

For the first half mile the two rode almost abreast, then, gradually, Iola's horse began forging ahead. She was a splendid rider and knew

how to get the utmost speed out of her horse almost as well as does the modern jockey. Then, too, she was considerable lighter than was Thure; and the weight of the rider had much to do with the winning of a race of this length. At any rate her horse continued to gain; but so slowly, that, when they were within a half mile of the bell pole, she was still only a few feet ahead of Thure.

The moment the two riders had dashed down the side of the ridge, followed by Conroyal and his men, they had been seen by the watchers at the house. Instantly some one shouted, "Here they come! Here they come!" and some one sprang to the bell rope and began ringing the big bell violently; and then, from all directions, women and children and men rushed to the court in front of the house, and stood, frantic with excitement, watching the swift advance of the cavalcade.

Mrs. Conroyal had been reclining on a couch close by the window; and, at the first shout, she had jumped to her feet and rushed out of the house; and now stood, with the others around the bell pole, straining her eyes at the rapidly oncoming riders.

"It is Iola! God is good! They have found my little girl! See, it is she who rides ahead, waving her mantilla," she cried joyously, almost the moment her eyes rested on the figure coming so swiftly on the back of the leading horse. "My girl, my little girl! Thank the good God, she is safe!" she kept murmuring over and over, until the two foam-

flecked horses, Iola's a rod ahead, were jerked to a plunging halt almost at her feet, and, with a cry of rapture, she caught the girl in her arms, as she jumped from the saddle.

The rest of that day was a gala day at the Conroyal rancho. The master gave money and food to the vaqueros and the other servants, and bade them feast and rejoice; while he gathered his family, including Hammer Jones, you may be sure, in the sanctuary of his home, and celebrated with feasting and much joyous talking the rescue of Iola and the fortunate coming of Thure and Rex and Hammer Jones.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAD STALLION

THE rancho of Noel Conroyal, consisting of some twenty thousand acres of the richest valley land, was bounded on the north by the rocky ridge known as the Old Sow's Back, and ran southward along both sides of Goose Creek for nearly ten miles. The house, flanked by the other buildings, stood on the summit of a low flat-topped hill, around whose base half-circled the waters of Goose Creek, near the center of this long stretch of land, and was a low one-storied structure, built of adobe or sun-dried bricks around an open central court, and had a red tile roof. The outside walls were always kept cleanly whitewashed, and the court within bloomed with flowers and shrubs and was watered by a small fountain, that bubbled up by the side of a huge rock near its center. Within were many square rooms, rudely but comfortably furnished, and nearly all had doors and windows opening out into the central court. When Conroyal came to California he had had considerable wealth and this had enabled him to build and furnish his home as few homes were built and furnished in the Valley in those pioneer days; and thus,

here in the midst of this beautiful valley, surrounded by his herds of cattle and horses, he lived like one of the patriarchs of old.

The sun, the next morning after that happy day of home-coming, had not yet looked down into the little central court, when Thure awoke. For a moment he could not realize where he was; and then all the happenings of the day before came to him with a rush and he sprang joyfully out of his bed.

He was home and in his own room again!

The moment he was dressed he hurried out into the court, to the fountain to bathe his face and hands in its cool waters. As he bent over the water, there was a patter of feet behind him, and a couple of round arms were quickly slipped over his shoulders and a couple of soft hands swiftly clasped together over his eyes.

"Guess! Who is it?" cried a merry voice, while the arms and the hands gently pulled his head backward and two soft lips pressed his lips.

"Iola. No one else would be so silly," and Thure squirmed just a little mite disdainfully from out the soft arms—and yet there was a happy light in his eyes. "I knew it was you the moment I heard the patter of your feet. Say, but it is great to be home again!" and his eyes wandered lovingly around the familiar scene.

"Yes," and Iola's face softened, "when one has such a beautiful home as this is and such a dear father and mother as we have. I never really

knew how much I loved dad and mama until Pa-dilla and his wicked Mexicans ran off with me, and—and I thought I might never see them again.”

For a moment the faces of both children clouded and the roses in Iola’s cheeks paled. Then her lips curved again into delightful smiles.

“But it is all happily over with now; and dad has promised us a gala day; and we are to have a picnic at the Laughing Springs, with racing and roping and shooting contests, with prizes; and a big feast, with a whole roasted calf, the very fattest in the herd; and a dance in the house-sala at night for the big folks, with Pedro’s band to play the dear music; and we are to invite all our friends; and—”

“Bully for dad!” broke in Thure enthusiastically. “But, when are we to have this great gala day? It must be soon,” and his face sobered; “because no one can tell just what will happen in California, now that Fremont is back. Come, let us hunt up dad and ask him if we can’t have the gala the day after to-morrow. That will give us time to ride round with the invitations to-day, and we can put in all to-morrow getting ready. Come,” and, catching hold of hands, the two children ran through a hall that, passing through the house, opened out into the court where the bell pole stood.

“There’s dad!” Iola cried, the moment they were through the outer door. “Down there by the big horse corral. I’ll beat you to him,” and, dropping

Thure's hand, the lively girl leaped away with the speed and grace of a frightened fawn.

Thure, with a loud hallo, sprang after her; but, although his legs were longer and he was a swift runner, he was fairly and decisively beaten by the deer-like speed of Iola, whose light feet seemed hardly to touch the ground.

"Hi, ho! Where is my little bird flying to this morning?" and Conroyal stretched out his arms, and, with a leap, Iola was in them.

"Into her dad's arms," laughed the panting girl. "I said I could beat Thure to you—and I did. O, dad, can we have the gala the day after to-morrow? Thure says something is going to happen now that Fremont is back; and we want our good time first. We can, can't we, dad?"

"Yes, the sooner we have that celebration the better," and he set Iola down on the ground. "But we won't try to corral any of the trouble that's floating around in the air until we have to—"

"Goody! It's all right. Dad says we can. Come on, Thure. Let's get our horses ready before we eat, so that we can start right after breakfast with the invitations. I'll ride Whitefoot," and she ran to the shed, where the saddles and bridles hung on racks; and, disdaining the help of either Thure or her father, caught up her saddle and bridle and hurried off toward a small fenced-in pasture, where the favorite riding horses of the family were kept.

Thure quickly swung his saddle up on his shoulder, caught up his bridle and followed after her.

The pasture was about half a mile from the house, on the south side of the hill, with Goose Creek running through the far end of it. When the boy and girl came near enough to see distinctly through the strong fence that surrounded it, both stopped and stared in surprise toward the farther end of the pasture. A man was walking toward the small herd of horses feeding along the bank of Goose Creek.

"Who can he be?" questioned Iola in alarm. "I am sure dad has sent none of the men to the pasture."

"We must find out," Thure answered; "and what he wants. Oh—Look!"

At that moment the man stopped, and, placing his fingers to his lips, uttered a long peculiar whistle. Instantly a beautiful snowy-white horse lifted his head, looked for a moment in the direction of the man, and then, with a glad whinny of welcome, galloped swiftly toward him.

"Oh," laughed Iola, "It's Rex. Out to give White Cloud his morning's kiss."

"Sure," smiled Thure. "Just see how tickled White Cloud acts to see Rex. I don't believe there ever was such another beautiful horse in the world; and, before he got too old for racing, there wasn't a horse in all California that could beat him. My, but don't I wish I could save the life of an Indian

chief, the way Rex saved the life of White Otter; and have him give me a horse like White Cloud. Come on. Let's hurry. I like to hear Rex talk to White Cloud. He acts just as if he understood every word Rex said to him."

"He is the dearest horse that ever lived," Iola agreed. "But, don't Rex think a lot of him? I don't believe he could like a wife any more."

While Iola was speaking the two had reached the gate, and, hurrying through, they hastened to where Rex stood, with one arm around the beautiful neck of White Cloud, talking to him and caressing him in much the same way that a man would his sweetheart.

"Hello!" Rex called, as they came up. "What is in the wind now that you are out after your horses so early?"

"We are going to have a big celebration the day after to-morrow, because dad is so glad that you and Thure and Ham are here and that I got away from the Mexicans; and we are going to ride around to invite all of our friends to come. Want to come with us?" and Iola dropped her saddle down by the side of Rex and began stroking the velvety nose of White Cloud.

"All right," Rex replied. "Just wait until I've had my talk out with White Cloud, and then I'll get my horse, and we'll get back to the house, and something to eat down us, and off we'll go. That celebration idea hits me about right. Say, old boy,"

and he again turned to White Cloud, "if we were as young as we once were, we'd show these Californians what a real fast race was like, wouldn't we, now? Do you remember that time in Sonoma when we shook the dust into the faces of all the fastest horses in Upper California? Sure you do, you bully old sport."

The horse nodded his head and rubbed his nose affectionately against Rex and looked, just as Thure said, as if he understood every word his master said; and, possibly, he did. At any rate this communion of souls seemed to give pleasure and comfort to each alike.

"Well, old boy," at length Rex said, taking his arm from around the neck of White Cloud, "I must be going. Good-by," and he held out his hand, as if he were saying farewell to a man.

White Cloud at once raised his right hoof and extended it to meet the grip of Rex's hand.

"O dear! And I never could get White Cloud to shake hands with me," complained Iola, laughingly, as Rex gripped the proffered hoof and shook it solemnly.

"Shouldn't wonder if he was afraid of hurting your pretty little hand, with his great hard hoof," declared Rex gallantly. "He is the most knowing horse I ever saw. Why, he knew me the instant he heard my whistle, and acted so pleased to see me. Well, well, we've been through some mighty exciting times together, haven't we, old comrade? I'd

like to get on that splendid back of yours for just one more ride; and I have half a notion—" He paused abruptly, and his fond eyes glanced critically over the still straight and muscular limbs, the powerful chest and into the eyes where the unconquered spirit still looked courageously forth—"By the eternal Andrew Jackson, I'll do it, old boy! You look fit for anything. Come on. Get your horses. I'm going to ride White Cloud," and he started for the gate, with White Cloud prancing and curveting along by his side like a young colt.

Thure and Iola now made haste to secure their horses, which they at once saddled and bridled and mounted and galloped off after Rex. They overtook him before he reached the saddle shed.

The day was cloudless, one of California's perfect days; and when, after having eaten their breakfast, Iola and Thure and Rex galloped off to invite their friends living in the Valley to come to the celebration, their spirits were as bright and as joyous as was the day. The elixir of the wonderful California air was in their blood. There were a dozen or so families of American settlers living in the Valley to be invited and a number of Californians, as the native inhabitants of Spanish descent were called; and then the Conroyals had a few Spanish friends dwelling in Sonoma, whom they wished to be with them on this joyous day. Many of the settlers lived miles apart, and to make the rounds they would have to ride far and hard. But,

to a California boy or girl in those days a horse-back ride of twenty-five or even fifty miles in a day was no hardship, was looked forward to with more of pleasure than of dread; and so no thoughts of the long ride before them troubled the spirits of Thure and Iola, as they rode gaily along over the smooth level of the valley, one on either side of Rex.

The Sacramento Valley at that date, 1846, was almost as wild as when only the Indians and the wild beasts roamed over it. A few American settlers and Spanish rancheros had built homes here; but their houses usually were miles apart and the intervening country was absolutely unfettered by the hands of man. Great herds of cattle, belonging to the rancheros, large droves of wild horses, belonging to anybody who could catch them, vast numbers of elk, black-tailed and other deer, antelope and the various smaller animals wandered almost at will over its rich pastures, while in the flanking foot-hills and mountains roamed the sullen grizzly bear, the prowling cougar or mountain lion and the snarling lynx and wildcat. Wolves, from the big gray timber wolf to the small and cowardly coyote, were everywhere.

But all this wild country was commonplace to the accustomed eyes of our three friends; and they rode over it without a thought of its wildness, although they were not insensible to the wonderful beauties of its varied scenes. The deer and the antelope were passed almost unnoticed. A grizzly, that

rushed growling at them from out a clump of trees, where, doubtless, she had concealed a couple of cubs, caused only a laugh, as they galloped swiftly away from her. The herds of cattle ran bellowing from them, the droves of wild horses snorted and galloped off whenever they came near and the skulking wolves scurried away through the tall grass at their approach. They had no fear of all this wild life, because they knew that they were safe from it all, with the swift legs of their horses under them—unless the unusual happened.

When noon came they stopped for dinner at the home of Rad Randolph, a settler who had come from the States only the fall before. He had a girl and a boy about the ages of Iola and Thure; and the children had become great chums. They waited here to rest their horses; and then, with many merry good-bys and calls on the part of Iola and Thure to their young friends to be sure and come over early on the day of the celebration, they continued on their way.

There was now but one settler left to visit; but his home was ten miles from the Randolph house, and the way thither was through a rougher country than that already traversed, where they could not ride as fast as they had been riding. By swinging to the westward from his house, they could make the little town of Sonoma on their way homeward; and thus complete the circuit of the settlement.

Some three miles from the Randolph home they came to where a rocky ridge separated two narrow valleys. When they reached the top of this ridge, they saw in the valley beyond a huge bull elk, standing near a little thicket of willows and not more than three hundred yards away.

"My, but isn't he a whopper!" Thure exclaimed the moment he caught sight of the buck, suddenly pulling up his horse. "And he's got the biggest pair of horns I ever saw on an elk's head! I want that head of horns, Rex, to hang over the door of my room. Let's see if we can't get him."

"All right," Rex agreed, his own eyes beginning to light up at the thought of the chase. "He sure is a big one. Now," and his eyes swept the little valley, "I reckon we can get him, if we charge right from here. He'll have to go straight up that steep hill; and, before he gets to the top of it, we sure can get close enough to shoot, seeing that it is down hill and level ground the most of the way for us. You won't mind our leaving you behind for a little, will you?" and Rex turned to Iola inquiringly. "You can follow us. Now, just see how White Cloud is pricking up his ears. I am sure he is as anxious as either of us to get after that buck. It will seem like old times to him. Are you good for it, old boy?" and Rex glanced down at the big horse beneath him a bit anxiously.

White Cloud pricked up his ears sharply and stamped impatiently; as if he were indignant to

think that his master would question his speed and endurance in a chase like that, even if he were getting a little old.

"Well, you certainly don't look or act a mite tired; and 'twon't be a long chase. I'll bet on you, old boy, bet the last beaver skin in my pack! Now, you don't care?" and Rex turned again to Iola.

"Not a bit. Why should I? I guess you won't leave Whitefoot so far behind," and Iola laughed, a bit provoked that Rex should think she could not look out for herself in the chase. "If I had my rifle with me, I'd show you what Whitefoot could do."

"Good!" laughed Rex. "You are a girl after my own heart, Little Coz. Now," and he turned to Thure, "I'll ride to the right and you to the left. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then, go," and away both horses sped, with Iola close behind.

They had covered nearly one hundred yards before the elk seemed to wake up to the fact that they were after him, then he leaped away straight toward the steep side of the hill, as Rex had said he would.

Iola slowed down her horse so that she could better watch the chase.

"I hope Thure shoots the buck," she said, apparently to herself. "He hasn't shot as many as Rex has. My, but don't White Cloud get over the ground easy! See, he's leaving Thure behind!

Poor boy, he won't stand any show at all, with Rex on White Cloud—Goodness! What is that coming?"

At that moment a sound, like the muffled and rapid beatings of a great bass drum, throbbed in her ears, and caused her to pull up her horse sharply and to turn swiftly in her saddle to see what it was that was thundering over the ridge behind her. As she looked, over the brow of the ridge plunged a horse, coming at breakneck speed; and, not a dozen feet behind him, followed a great black stallion, the foam flying from his mouth, his teeth bared and his ears laid almost flat back on his head; and behind the stallion thundered a sea of tossing heads and manes and pounding hoofs. Almost in an instant the stallion overtook the fleeing horse, and, with a scream of rage, plunged furiously upon him. The attacked horse partly turned to ward off this ferocious assault. The instant he did so the great stallion reared up on his hind legs and struck out powerfully with both fore hoofs. Iola, from where she sat horror-stricken on her horse, heard the crash of the bones as one of the great hoofs struck the skull of the terrified horse and saw him sink motionless to the ground. The stallion, with shrill screams of insane fury, bit and kicked the insensible body of his victim for a moment; and then, tossing his head high up in the air, glared around—and caught sight of Iola sitting on the back of Whitefoot, not two hundred yards away.

Iola wore a red dress and a small red cape-like mantilla was fastened about her shoulders. Possibly it was the sight of this blood-like color that added heat to the already insane rage of the wild stallion; at any rate, with shrill screams, with ears laid back and teeth bared and head outstretched, the great beast plunged straight for her.

Up to this moment Iola had sat motionless on the back of her trembling horse, watching with fascinated eyes the terrifying scene. But, the instant the stallion lifted his head and caught sight of her, she realized her frightful peril. She had often heard the vaqueros and the men who gathered around her father's hospitable hearth tell terrifying tales of wild stallions gone mad; and it needed no second glance to tell her that what she saw was one of these raging animals, the most dreaded of all the terrors of the Valley. One horrified glance showed her that Rex and Thure were still chasing the elk, without a thought of her peril, another, that the stallion was coming straight for her, a black thunderbolt of fury; and then, with shrill cries for help, she lashed Whitefoot with her whip; and the most terrifying race of her life was on.

The unusual had happened!

Whitefoot was as frightened as was his mistress; and, for a short distance, so great was the stimulus of his fear, that the great beast gained but little on him. A glance back showed Iola this, and hope rose in her heart; but only to sink the next mo-

ment, when, on looking ahead she saw that Whitefoot had turned and was not running directly toward Rex and Thure, but far to one side of them toward the distant end of the valley. In vain she tugged and strained at the bridle rein. Whitefoot, wild with fright, was utterly beyond her control. She could not make him swerve an inch in the desired direction. She glanced back. Already the black stallion was nearer; and behind him still thundered the half-crazed drove of his comrades, their heads and manes tossing wildly in the air.

Her only hope lay in a shot from the rifle of Rex or Thure; and Whitefoot was bearing her farther away from them each moment!

Again she turned her face in their direction, and, putting both hands to her mouth, screamed as loudly as she could force the sound out of her mouth.

Thure, in the excitement of the chase, heard her not; but Rex caught the sound of her voice and turned his head. One glance, and the blood left his face, and he jerked White Cloud around, and plunged the spurs into his flanks, and, with set lips and eyes fixed on that fearful race, urged him to the chase of the black stallion.

If he could not get near enough to the black stallion in time to shoot before the great beast overtook Iola—He did not finish the thought, but shuddered and gripped his rifle tightly and, leaning forward, implored White Cloud to do his best.

"Old boy, comrade!" he called. "Faster, for the love of heaven, faster! It is Iola, the life of Iola that is at stake! Good boy! Splendid fellow! Just show that great black brute what a real horse can do! Splendid! Splendid!" he encouraged. "But, yet a little faster, a little faster, good comrade! It is the last, the very last race I will ask of you. If you win, nothing, nothing will be too good for you. Faster! Faster!"

And magnificently the splendid old horse responded. Gone were all the infirmities of age. Again the mighty muscles answered perfectly to every call of that unconquerable spirit, as with neck outstretched, he seemed to skim, like a great white bird, rather than run, over the level of the valley. And he had need; for the great black stallion was hardly less powerful than was he.

At the start nearly three hundred yards separated White Cloud from the mad black stallion; but, from the first he gained, slowly, but still he gained. Rex noted this gain and the gain of the mad stallion on Whitefoot with anxious eyes; and shuddered, as he saw plainly that it would be impossible for him to overtake the great beast in time to save Iola, even if the wonderful speed of White Cloud should hold out, unless something happened to delay the mad brute.

He yelled; but the horse paid not the slightest attention to his yelling. He tried to get more speed out of White Cloud; but the noble animal

was already doing his best; and, in an agony of horror, he was compelled to watch the black stallion drawing closer and closer to Iola, and still remained helpless to rescue. Now the brute was not fifty yards—thirty—twenty—behind the fleeing girl and horse; and still at least two hundred yards separated Rex from the beast—too far to chance a shot, when all depended on that one shot. (You will remember that this was before the day of the repeating rapid-fire rifle, and understand that Rex would have no time to reload, if he should miss the first shot.)

Suddenly the heart of Rex gave a great bound of hope; for he saw Iola loosen the red mantilla from around her neck, turn in her saddle and hurl the cloth straight toward the oncoming stallion. The wind caught the mantilla, whirled it upward, and then cast it suddenly downward directly over the head of the mad brute.

The stallion reared and plunged and shook his great head, insane with rage that that red clinging thing should come between him and his prey. In an instant he had flung the mantilla to the ground, in another instant, he had torn and had trampled it deep in the dirt, and, screaming shrilly, was plunging more furiously than ever after Iola.

But, brief as was the respite, Whitefoot had gained many valuable yards; and White Cloud was now within fifty yards of the raging brute.

Still Rex dared not shoot. The chance of missing was too great. If he could only get abreast of the great black stallion, then he could be sure of his aim, sure that that one ball in his rifle would do its work. He bent close over the neck of White Cloud. He implored—threatened. He stroked the white glossy neck, now wet with the sweat of tremendous exertion, and begged the noble animal for a little more speed.

“You are doing splendidly, old boy; but just a little faster, comrade, great-heart!” he urged. “Just a little faster; and, thank God, we will yet be in time!”

And again White Cloud responded. His whole body seemed to lengthen, to crouch closer to the ground with each mighty leap, and a tense quiver, like the tightening of every muscle and tendon in his body, swept through his frame. His loved master had called for his uttermost; and he was giving him his all.

Rex now kept his eyes fixed on the black stallion and on Iola, with his rifle held ready to shoot on the instant—if he must. He saw that the black brute was now gaining faster than ever on Whitefoot; but he also saw that every tremendous leap of White Cloud was bringing him closer to the mad horse. Now the bared teeth of the stallion was not six feet behind the streaming hairs of the tail of Whitefoot; but now White Cloud, gallant

White Cloud, was almost abreast of the crazed brute and not ten yards from the great heaving black side.

The time to shoot had come!

Rex was not a praying man; but, as he threw his rifle to his shoulder, a silent prayer went upward with it to the great God of all to make his aim sure—There would be no time for a second shot. Then his finger pressed the trigger.

For an instant the great black stallion plunged on, as if untouched; and then his legs seemed to crumple all up underneath him, and, like a dead rock, his huge body went to the ground, plowing through the tough sod with the force of the impact.

Rex uttered a wild yell of triumph; and, a minute later, White Cloud had placed him close alongside of Whitefoot; and, stretching out his arms, he lifted Iola from her saddle to his and allowed the fear-crazed Whitefoot to speed on unchecked.

The moment White Cloud stopped both leaped off his back; and the arms of both went around his neck, Iola sobbing and laughing and calling him all the endearing names she could think of, and Rex just holding his head close in his arms and softly stroking his nose and telling him what a great old horse he was and how he had won the everlasting gratitude of his master and of all those dear to him. White Cloud stood with his head hanging low, his great chest heaving and

falling and his strong old limbs all of a-tremble; but, if ever the eyes of a horse showed the look of a victor, then that look was in the eyes of White Cloud, as he turned them to the face of his master. The look seemed to say: "You thought I was too old to be of much account, didn't you? But I have showed you that it is the spirit that conquers."

Rex, as soon as he had told White Cloud what a great old horse he thought him, at once gave his attention to his condition. With bunches of dry grass he and Iola carefully rubbed the sweat and foam from his body; and, not until this task was completed, did either of them turn their eyes toward the black stallion, save only to see that no danger threatened from that direction.

The body of the black stallion lay where it had fallen, something like a hundred yards from where they stood; and around it circled and snorted and stamped the drove of wild horses, a hundred or more in number, as if they could not understand why their late powerful king lay so quiet and helpless. But, on the approach of Rex and Iola, with White Cloud walking between them, they all galloped furiously off under the leadership of a big iron-gray stallion.

The king is dead. Long live the king!

Rex and Iola stopped at the body of the wild stallion, and looked down on the dead monarch with feelings of thankfulness, not unmixed with pity. He had been a splendid animal, the most

magificently built and muscled wild horse that Rex had ever seen; and it seemed too bad that his glorious life of wild freedom should come to such an untimely end. On his broad chest was a festering wound, doubtless made by the sharp teeth of a wolf that he had slain while protecting his drove, and, probably, the cause of his madness.

As they stood there contemplating all that was left of the gallant black stallion, Thure came galloping up, the head of the elk held on the saddle in front of him showing that he had been successful in his chase. He was very much excited.

"What has happened?" he cried, as he sprang from his saddle and stared in astonishment down on the carcass of the great black stallion.

In as few words as possible Rex told him. Then Thure, too, had to throw his arms around the neck of White Cloud, and tell him what a gallant old horse he was.

"Now," Rex said, when Thure had caressed and praised White Cloud, "you had better mount your horse and go after Whitefoot. We'll wait for you over there in the shade of that tree," and he pointed to a wide-spreading oak that grew in solitary stateliness a short distance away.

Thure, leaving the elk head by the side of the dead stallion, sprang on the back of his horse and started after Whitefoot. He found the horse, after following his trail for a couple of miles, quietly feeding in a little valley between two small hills,

his panic over; and, catching him without difficulty, hurried back to where he had left Rex and Iola.

In the meantime Rex had been considering what would be best for them to do now. He did not feel like riding White Cloud farther that day. The noble animal had, indeed, done his utmost, and was now able to do little more than walk.

"I think we had best return at once to the Randolph rancho," Rex said, when Thure appeared with Whitefoot. "I am sure that Randolph will gladly see that your invitation is carried to the Ogden rancho and to your friends in Sonoma; and I can get a fresh horse there, so that I will not be obliged to ride White Cloud back home, but can lead him. I do not think that he ought to be ridden another step to-day. If I can get him safely back to Uncle Noel's, I'll be more than satisfied."

Accordingly they at once started back for the Randolph rancho, Rex walking by the side of White Cloud and Thure and Iola mounted on their horses.

Mr. Randolph willingly promised to convey their invitation to the Ogden family and also to their friends in Sonoma, and joined in with the children in urging them to stay with them until the next morning, in order to give White Cloud a chance to recover his strength. But Rex, after carefully examining White Cloud, decided that it would be best to get the horse home as soon as possible. Accordingly, after resting here for an hour, during

which time you may be sure everyone on the rancho had to pay his admiring court to White Cloud, our three friends started homeward, Rex riding on one of the Randolph horses and leading White Cloud.

They reached the home rancho a little after sundown; and, when the story of their adventure with the black stallion had been told, White Cloud was received like a conquering king; for there was not a man on the rancho who did not know the great wild black stallion. Indeed, for the last two years every vaquero in the Valley had been trying to rope this magnificent animal; but, so wonderful was his speed and so great his endurance, that no horseman had ever been able to get within roping distance of him; and the feat of White Cloud, considering his age and the fact that he bore a large man on his back, in overtaking the wild stallion, appeared to them as the most wonderful exploit ever performed by a California horse, indeed, as something almost miraculous.

A shed near the house was quickly prepared; and here, warmly and softly bedded with straw and his body protected from the chill of the night air with blankets, White Cloud held court until a late hour.

"Everything that love and gratitude can do for a horse to make his last years comfortable shall be done for White Cloud," Conroyal declared fervently, when Iola herself, nestled snugly in his arms, had told him how White Cloud had saved

her life. "He has done more for me and mine than years of kindness can repay," and there were tears of thankfulness in his eyes as he bent his head close over his little girl and pressed her tenderly to his bosom.

CHAPTER XIV

AN INTERRUPTED GALA

THE following day was a busy one for all at the Conroyal rancho; for was not the morrow the great day of the celebration! There were certain dainties to be cooked and the house to be prepared; and this kept the women folks busy. There were the carretas and the horses to be made ready to convey the picnickers and their *impedimenta* to the picnic grounds at the Laughing Springs; and there were the races and the contests and the various games to be planned and arranged for and the roping and the killing of the fat cattle that were to be eaten; and this kept all the others in a constant turmoil of work and excitement. Indeed, for a time, the confusion, the rushing hither and thither of men, women and children, the shouting, the laughing and the merry jesting, was so great that it did not seem to be possible to get orderly results out of so much disorder; but, finally, things began to adjust themselves properly; and, when night came, everything was ready for the great day.

During this time you may be certain that Thure and Iola were pretty much in evidence everywhere.

Indeed, one would have thought from the way they rushed about, now in the house, now out again, now here, now there, advising, admonishing, suggesting, sometimes even helping, that the responsibility of the success of the whole affair rested solely on their two pairs of shoulders; and, when at last all that could be done had been done and it was time to seek their beds, so that they could be up early on the great day, it was a very tired boy and girl who bade each other good night.

"I'll be first at the fountain," Iola called, as she vanished through the door of her room.

"You can throw a cup of cold water in my face, if you can catch me asleep in the morning," Thure laughed back. "And, if I don't have my face and hands all washed before you show up, you can duck my head in the fountain," he continued vauntingly.

"Then you'll get the ducking all right," and the door closed behind Iola.

Thure had a curious dream that night. He dreamed that he was standing alone on the top of the Old Sow's Back; and that the valleys on both sides of him were filled with an ever increasing throng of wild horses and elk; and that the wild horses were charging madly back and forth, back and forth, up both sides of the ridge toward him; and that each charge brought them nearer to where he stood; and that the elk sat astride on the backs of the wild horses, furiously waving their antlers and yelling in Mexican at him; and that the air

above him was filled with red and blue and yellow eagles; and that all the eagles were swooping down upon him, screaming shrilly and clicking their hooked bills together; and that, just as the wild horses, with the mad elk on their backs, were about to rush over him, and just as the screaming eagles, with their bills clicking, were about to swoop down upon him, there came a sudden great clap of thunder; and, at the sound, the charging wild horses changed into two great rivers of foaming water that rolled tumultuously over him, and the red and blue and yellow eagles became a huge pink faucet that squirted a flood of ice-cold water straight down into his upturned face—and then Thure awoke, spluttering and yelling, to find Iola standing by his bedside, deliberately pouring the contents of a huge dipper filled with water all over his head and neck.

“Wow! You villain!” and Thure jerked the bed clothes up over his face the moment his dazed eyes caught sight of the laughing face of Iola, while the girl dropped the dipper and ran screaming with laughter out of the room.

“Hurry up and get dressed. You know you owe me a ducking in the fountain yet!” she called back, as she pulled the door shut behind her.

Thure was out of bed almost before the door closed behind Iola; and was greatly chagrined to find the first rays of the morning’s sun peeking over the tops of the eastern mountains into his room.

And he had intended to be up an hour before sunrise!

"Well, you sleepyhead!" he soliloquized disgustedly as he hurriedly slipped on his clothes. "You deserve the dipper of water in your face, and the ducking, too. But, I'll get even with Iola, sometime. Just see if I don't," and he hastened from the room out into the court, where the cool waters of the fountain furnished a wash-basin.

Iola was already there, hiding behind a large rose-bush, waiting to give Thure his ducking; and, the moment the boy bent over the basin of the fountain, she jumped to her feet and rushed for him.

"O! All right! Duck away! I deserve it, to let a girl beat me!" and Thure submitted meekly to the two plump hands that instantly caught him by the ears.

"Once, to wash the sleepy-seeds out of your eyes," and vigorously the hands that held the ears shoved the head down under the water and held it there for a moment. "Twice, because you let a girl beat you," and down again went the head under the water, to come up with face very red and mouth spouting water. "Three times, because you seem to think it a disgrace to be beaten by a girl," and splash under the water once more the head disappeared, just as the mouth opened to utter a protest, with the result that the protest ended in a mouthful of water. "Four times, to—"

"H—ol—l—ld up!" and, with a quick twist and

a squirm, Thure wrenched his ears free from the two hands, flung his left arm around Iola and placed his right hand on the back of her neck. "And the fourth time," he cried, "is just to show Miss Smarty how cool and fine the water feels," and the hand on the back of Iola's neck suddenly plunged her head downward, until nose and mouth and eyes and hair were under the water of the fountain.

For a minute or two there was a lively struggle and a great splashing of water, punctuated by little shrieks and laughing screams; and then the two stood facing each other, the water dripping from their face and hair.

"Well, I ducked you three times!" Iola declared, shaking her head until the water flew from her hair in drops.

"You certainly did," laughed Thure, wiping his eyes with both fists. "Now, let's call it quits; and hurry and get our breakfast, or the Randolphs will be here before we get through. You know Bud threatened to pull us both out of bed."

"And you can thank me that he did not get the chance to pull you out," and Iola's face dimpled. "My, but you did look scared, when that water hit your face!" and she broke into a laugh and ran into the house, where she found breakfast already served and awaiting their coming.

"Hello! Hello, inside! Wake up! Tumble out of your beds, you sleepyheads!" and the pound-

ing of horses' hoofs, suddenly brought to a halt, sounded outside the door, just as Iola and Thure were about to eat the last mouthfuls of their breakfast.

"O! It's Bud and Ruth Randolph!" and Iola dropped knife and fork and was out of the door, followed by Thure, in time to have her arms around a plump, blue-eyed girl of about her own age the moment she jumped from her saddle to the ground, while Thure grabbed the hand of a freckle-faced, tow-headed boy of about his own size.

The Randolph boy and girl had ridden ahead of their father and mother, who now came trotting up, followed by a number of their vaqueros, each with his señorita seated on the saddle in front of him, his broad-brimmed sombrero on her head, his own head bare or covered with a bright-colored handkerchief. There was much merry laughter while the gallant cavaliers and the fair señoritas were dismounting and welcomed to the Conroyal rancho.

A few minutes later another gay party arrived, with more children and more cavaliers and señoritas, dressed in their picturesque Mexican costumes; and thus party after party galloped up to the court in front of the Conroyal house, dismounted and joined the merry crowd that buzzed happily in and about the house. All came on horseback; for this was before the day of the easy-riding carriage in California, when the only

vehicle in use was the rude carreta, a much less speedy and comfortable method of getting over the ground than the back of a horse.

By nine o'clock all the expected guests had arrived; and now preparations were made to start for the picnic-grounds at the Laughing Springs some five miles distant. Again the cavaliers mounted and again the fair damsels were swung up on the saddles in front of them; and, with much merry shoutings back and forth, many of the older guests remaining at the house, the merry cavalcade set out for the Laughing Springs.

Carretas laden with chicken, stuffed turkeys, tamales, enchiladas and other California dainties, and the dishes and the cooking utensils, had been sent on ahead an hour or more before the start was made, so that there was no baggage to trouble the going of our merry picnickers. They sang songs, one of them strumming on a guitar; they laughed and cracked jokes as they galloped along over the level of the valley; and, when the Laughing Springs were reached, they quickly unsaddled, picketed their horses and the merrymaking began.

The Laughing Springs bubbled up through the sand at the base of a tall pinnacle of rocks, with a sound like the low laughter of many young maids, and then ran singing softly adown the valley. Along its banks grew many stately trees; and it was here, underneath their cool shade, that our

picnickers gathered for the dance, the game or the merry quibblings dear to the hearts of youth; and soon the violins were playing, the guitars strumming and the patter-patter of swiftly moving feet on the soft carpet of the sod sounding its pleasant invitation to the ears of all.

During all this time Thure and Iola had not seen an idle moment. They had been on the move every instant, greeting the newcomers and receiving their congratulations, Iola for her escape from Padilla, Thure for his safe return from the journey in the wilderness, and hurrying about among the guests to see that everything was going all right on this their own special gala day. But now, with the dance going underneath the trees for the older youths and maids, the servants properly at work preparing the feast and even the "fattest calf in the herd" killed and spitted whole and roasting slowly over a great bed of glowing coals, they felt that they could give themselves up to having a good time with the boys and girls of their own age. Accordingly they gathered, a couple of dozen of them, in a little circular opening in the woods a few rods away from the dancers.

"Now, what shall the first game be?" Iola cried, her eyes sparkling.

"Blind man's buff!" shouted Ruth Randolph. "And the boys can only catch the girls and the girls can only catch the boys. Who'll be it?"

"Iola!" cried a dozen voices. "The picnic is for her and she must be it. Tie your handkerchief over her eyes, Vallejo!"

Iola, with a flushed face and black eyes dancing and a merry "all right," submitted to the fastening of the handkerchief over her eyes by the tall young Spaniard, Miguel Vallejo, a near relative of General Vallejo of Sonoma; and the lively game began; and soon the fun of the sport was bringing forth shrieks of laughter from all its merry participants. And, not until the majordomo of the cooking forces announced, with a grand flourish of both arms, that the feast was ready for the eating, did the merriment of the dancing and the playing of the games cease. Then all gathered around the heavy mats which the careful servants had spread out on the ground and covered with white cloths whereon the feast was spread, the youths gallantly laying down cloaks or blankets for the maids to sit on; and, with a lively clattering of tongues, the eating began.

If there were time, it would be interesting to tell of all the merrymaking, the bright witticisms, the laughable haps and the mishaps and the funny tricks of this delightful picnic feast underneath the trees in the beautiful Sacramento Valley, when civilization was young in California and the hearts of all throbbed with the wild free joyous life of the untrammelled nature around them. And yet there is little need of my giving such a description;

for, I fancy, the heart of every boy or girl reader has already pictured, even more vividly than my words could, what such a feast in the midst of such surroundings must have been, and wished that he or she might have been there.

After the feasting was over, an hour or so was spent resting quietly in the cool shade of the trees, while the older ones gossiped and the younger ones told merry tales and played funny pranks on one another.

By common courtesy no one spoke of the trouble brewing between the Americans and the Mexicans. There were nearly as many native Californians present as there were Americans, and all were good friends, and no one cared to introduce a subject that might cause discord or throw a chill of apprehension over the joys of the gathering. Then it was the Californian nature never to borrow trouble. Gay, volatile, thoughtless of the past, careless of the future, he lived only for the present; and the present just then seemed very good to him, so why trouble himself or his neighbors about the possibilities of the to-morrow? But the Americans did not look thus upon life; and, underneath all their merriment, a sensitive soul might have felt the chill of the apprehension that troubled their spirits. Fremont was back. The Mexicans were threatening to raid the Sacramento Valley and drive all the Americans out of the country. Their own homes, their own lives were in danger; and, while they

could put on the outward forms of merriment, they could not forget these threatening dangers. Still, since none of them gave voice to their troublesome thoughts and all did their best to help joy reign unconfined, there was nothing to chill the warmth of the gala day's festivities.

What was now left of the afternoon, the rest hour having past, was to be devoted to the horse-racing and the roping and the shooting contests; and soon the young men and boys began to gather in groups, while their tongues buzzed in praise of the speed of this or that horse or the skill of a favorite vaquero. Presently, into the midst of this increasing buzzing of excited tongues, rode Rex Holt and Dill Conroyal, who were to have charge of the afternoon's races and contests and who had remained at the house until after the noonday meal. Their advent was welcomed with a glad shout; and preparations for the various races and contests were at once begun.

"All who are to enter the horse-race get ready!" Rex had mounted on top of a rock and now shouted so that all could hear. "The race will be run from this rock to that lone sycamore and back," and he pointed to where an old sycamore tree stood out by itself a half a mile away. "Iola Conroyal, in behalf of her father, will present the winner with this beautiful saddle that you see lying on the rock at my feet. There will be but one heat; and the man on the back of the first horse to cross a line

drawn from this rock to that white stone a couple of rods away, takes the saddle. Everybody get ready for the horse-race!"

Five youths, two Americans and three Californians, mounted on their horses, now dashed up to the rock where Rex stood and declared themselves ready for the race. One of the Californians was Miguel Vallejo and one of the Americans was Bud Randolph; and at once these two boys became the center of interest; for the horse that each boy rode had defeated all rivals heretofore, and now, for the first time, they were to be pitted against each other. Consequently these two horses were the favorites in the coming race, and each had his enthusiastic backers, who were ever willing to shout his praises. Then, too, in a friendly way their riders were rivals. Of all the American boys in the Valley, Bud Randolph was considered the most skilful horseback rider and lasso-thrower, while Miguel Vallejo was without a peer in horsemanship and skill with the lasso among the Californian youths of his age. Also this was the first time that either boy had met the other in friendly contest. Naturally, under such circumstances, the Americans were all shouting for Bud Randolph and his horse and the Californians were equally sure that young Vallejo would win the saddle.

The horse of Miguel Vallejo was a glossy black in color, deep-chested and long-limbed, while that rode by Bud Randolph was a sturdy iron-gray

American pony, at least a couple of hands shorter in height than was his long-legged antagonist.

The two riders differed as much as did their horses. Bud Randolph was chunky and freckle-faced and tow-headed, but wonderfully quick and agile in his movements and possessed of a temperament not easily thrown into confusion. Miguel Vallejo was tall, slim, lithe, dark-eyed, dark-faced and black-haired, with the hot passionate blood of his noble Spanish ancestry coursing warmly through his veins, tempered by a singularly just and generous character. He was dressed in the charming and picturesque costume of the native Californian of wealth and social distinction. On his head he wore a soft felt hat, broad-brimmed and circled with a silver and gold cord and tassels. His jacket was of dark velvet, with scarlet flounce and facing, and adorned with many silver buttons, the white of his snowy linen showing at the throat and chest. His black velvet breeches were short, reaching down only to the knees, and open at the bottom for about six inches along the outer side of each leg, with small silver buttons along the opening and a fine large silver button with which to close the silk knee-band. A scarlet silk sash was tied around his waist, the tasseled end falling down gracefully over one of his hips. On his legs below the knees were beautifully embroidered deerskin leggings, fastened under the flexible-soled calfskin shoes by broad straps and around the

knees by silk garters. The insteps of the shoes were embroidered with silk and the ends of the toes were pointed and turned up to protect the leather from the stirrups. Large silver spurs, fastened to the heels of the shoes, completed his personal equipment. Thus dressed and seated in his elaborately tooled and beautifully adorned saddle on the back of his goodly black horse, Miguel Vallejo made, indeed, a striking and picturesque appearance.

Almost in direct contrast to the elaborate and beautiful costume of young Vallejo was the dress of Bud Randolph. A plain broad-brimmed hat covered his head. A blue woolen shirt, with a red silk handkerchief knotted around the neck, fringed deerskin trousers fastened about the waist by a broad belt, and soft deerskin moccasins, completed the clothing of his body. He wore no spurs, trusting to his voice and a small riding whip to get all the speed possible out of his horse.

Such were the two principal contestants in the race about to take place; and, in a way, they typified the two races of people which they represented—the sturdy, practical, enterprising Anglo-Saxon and the elegant, chivalrous, display-loving, romantic Spaniard.

“Get the fore hoofs of your horses on the line,” and Rex pointed to a small furrow that had been traced in the ground from the rock where he stood to a small white stone a couple of rods away.

"You will go from a standing start, at the crack of my pistol. Now, every man who is to race get his horse on the line."

After a couple of minutes maneuvering the five contestants reined up their horses on the line between the two rocks, as directed, and sat, every muscle tense, awaiting the signal. Back of this line and circling out along both sides of the course crowded the friends of the contestants.

"I am counting on young Vallejo coming in a good one hundred yards ahead," boasted one of the Californian's friends. "There's not a horse in the Valley that can beat that black of his. I have seen him race and I know."

"He sure does look like a racer," ventured a young American standing near; "but that iron-gray of Bud's has got greased lightning for legs underneath him when it comes to racing, and I shouldn't be none surprised if your black didn't get a smell of that prize saddle. Bud ain't no quitter and his horse ain't no quitter neither. Now—"

"Oh, but can't you men wait until the race is run before you settle it!" laughed Iola, who, with Thure and Ruth Randolph, was standing near enough to overhear the two men. "See, Rex is about to start them," and with sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks, she turned toward the alert line of horsemen.

"Are all the racers in proper position and ready?" called Rex at that moment.

"They are," came back the answer.

"Then, ready," and he raised his pistol above his head.

There was not a horse among the five that did not know what that moment meant. All stood with muscles braced, eyes afire, nostrils dilated and ears pricked forward.

"Go!" shouted Rex, and pulled the pistol trigger.

As if started by one shaft of machinery the trained horses leaped forward at the crack of the pistol; and for the first few rods no one could say which horse was ahead, so evenly did they run. Then the black of Vallejo and a bay rode by a Mexican began slowly pushing ahead.

"Hi! Hi! See the black!" yelled the boastful Californian. "He's throwing grass in the face of your iron-gray! He's ahead of the lot in the first one hundred rods! Hi! Hi! The black! The Vallejo black!" and he grabbed off his hat and swung it wildly around his head.

"He certainly is going some now," admitted the American; "but wait till the race is done before you do your crowing. 'Tain't the horse that wins the first one hundred rods that gets the saddle, but the one that crosses the goal-line first. I am still counting on the iron-gray for the winner. I know Bud and I know his horse."

"Thank you, Jack," and Ruth touched the sleeve of the American. "Bud will come in ahead, if—if he can," and her cheeks whitened with anxiety.

"But Miguel's horse is very fast and he is such a splendid rider. O, I do hope Bud will beat him! Bud doesn't like to be beaten by anyone."

"Well, it looks as if he were going to be beaten this time, whether he likes it or not," and Iola, her dark eyes glowing with excitement, stamped one little foot impatiently on the ground. "He isn't even second in the race. The bay is still ahead of him and they are already almost to the tree. And I wanted him to get the saddle," and her face flushed a little. "He—he needs it more than Miguel does."

"Hi! Hi! The black! See the black! He is a good ten yards in the lead!" yelled the excited Californian, as Vallejo and horse swung swiftly around the sycamore tree and started back on the home-stretch. "Now, where is your iron-gray?" and he turned triumphantly to the American. "He isn't even second. Where is them greased lightning legs of his? Why, he must be a good five rods behind the black, and the race already half run!"

"He's a-coming," answered the American dryly, his face lighting up, for, as he spoke, Bud was seen to strike his horse for the first time with his whip and to lean forward in his saddle, as if he were urging his pony to do his utmost. "Now watch them greased-lightning legs split the wind."

And, indeed, Bud was a-coming. In very short order he overtook and passed the bay and soon was

pressing close behind the big black, how close it was impossible to tell at that distance, for the two horses were coming directly toward the excited onlookers.

The yelling and the shouting had now all ceased. Everyone stood with eyes intent on the coming horses, hardly venturing to draw a breath, so great was the suspense. Could the wonderful little iron-gray overtake the big black in time to pass the line first? was the query on every face.

The two horses were now within a hundred rods of the goal and seemingly running almost abreast. Young Vallejo was leaning forward almost on the neck of his black, and stroking the glossy neck, and urging him with endearing words and alluring promises to do his utmost. Bud sat a little humped in the saddle, his left hand holding the reins loose, his right gripping tight the upraised whip, his lips white and tight-drawn across his teeth, his blue eyes fixed on the goal and the big black, now not two yards ahead of him.

"Oh!—Oh!" gasped Iola, as Bud suddenly brought his whip down sharply on the flank of the iron-gray, when within ten rods of the goal, and uttered so piercing and sudden a yell that everyone jumped.

Like a huge jack-rabbit, the little iron-gray bounded forward in response to that blow and yell; and, in another instant, had crossed the goal-line a length ahead of the black.

For one brief moment everyone was silent; and then all yelled, the Californians as heartily as did the Americans, and made a rush for the victorious horseman; but the first one to congratulate Bud was Miguel Vallejo. The instant he pulled up his horse, he leaped from his saddle and hurried to where Bud sat on the little iron-gray.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he cried, his dark face shining with admiration, as he reached up and gripped Bud's hand. "The most wonderful little horse I have ever seen; and you, you are a most marvelous rider, Bud Randolph. I did not think there was a horse and boy in all California that could beat me and my black; but you and this little horse have done it," and again he gripped Bud's hand and shook it, only sincere admiration and honest wonder pictured on his handsome face.

As soon as the turmoil had been sufficiently quieted, Rex summoned Bud to the rock; and Iola, with cheeks that flushed with the deep red of the rose and eyes that shone like stars underneath the dark of her eyebrows, presented him with the prize saddle. As she did so she whispered: "I am glad, so glad you won it, Bud; because, because," she added hurriedly, "you are an American."

"You have a wonderful little horse there, Bud," Rex said, as he stepped down from the rock and laid his hand on the neck of the iron-gray. "I never saw but one horse run the way he does."

"Yes," answered Bud, his face flushing with pride, "Gray Cloud is a wonder; and he ought to be, for his father was your own White Cloud."

"Ah-h!" and Rex drew in a long breath. "That explains it. I thought he ran like White Cloud. Well, he is a worthy son of a most worthy father."

For many minutes the merry crowd buzzed excitedly around Bud and his little iron-gray, Gray Cloud; but, at length, Rex again mounted the rock, and was about to announce that the next event would be the rope-throwing contest, when his eyes, glancing over the level of the valley, caught sight of a solitary horseman riding swiftly toward them, and swinging his hat excitedly as he rode to attract their attention. A second look and he recognized one of Noel Conroyal's vaqueros, and he knew by the man's actions that he was the bearer of an important message. Dill, at about the same moment, had caught sight of the horseman, and at once hurried to the side of Rex.

"It's Pio Pedro," Dill said anxiously. "And he's riding one of dad's best horses. I wonder what can have happened?" and his face whitened.

The eyes of all the picnickers were now on the horseman, and many a face besides Dill's whitened with apprehension as he drew near. All felt, instinctively, that he was a messenger of ill, that his swift coming had something to do with the trouble between the Mexicans and the Americans; and they

awaited his arrival with the dread of what his message might portend showing on every face.

"The señor commands your immediate return," the rider cried, as he pulled up his panting, sweat-dripping horse in front of Rex and Dill. "Not longer than an hour ago there came to the rancho one hard-riding man, who says the soldiers of Mexico are marching up the Sacramento Valley, driving out all the American settlers and their ranchos plundering and burning and their cattle shooting. And the señor would have all return at once to his rancho."

"Saddle up!" shouted Rex the moment the man ceased speaking; and then, when he noted the confusion into which the words of the messenger had thrown the company, he added reassuringly: "I do not think there is any immediate danger; but we had better get back to the house as soon as we can. Probably we will find the report of the coming of the Mexican soldiers only a rumor, or, at least, greatly exaggerated. Now, there is no need of any rush or excitement. Just quietly saddle up and we will ride back to the house," and he led the way to where the horses had been picketed.

In a very few minutes all the gay picnickers were on their horses' backs; but now with all the gaiety driven out of their hearts by the dread news of Pio Pedro.

There was no laughter, nor singing and but little talking on that swift ride back to the Conroyal

rancho. Rex and Dill rode ahead and set a swift pace; and the others followed close behind. When they came within sight of the house and the other buildings they saw the evidences of great excitement there. The court in front of the house was crowded with men and women and horses; and every minute or so a little party of horsemen would separate themselves from the crowd and gallop off swiftly over the valley in different directions.

"O dear!" and Lola's voice almost broke into sobs. "This will spoil my gala day. Everybody is going home; and we can't have the dear dance with the sweet music in the big sala to-night; and those horrid Mexican soldiers will come and drive us all from our homes where we have been so happy; and—"

"No they won't," and Thure's face flushed and his eyes lighted defiantly. "They won't drive dad an inch. And there are Fremont and Kit Carson! Just let them try to drive us Americans out of the Valley, and see what Fremont and Kit Carson and their men will do about it! They are here on purpose to protect the rights of the American settlers; and Fremont and his men are the fellows that can do it."

"Oh, I hope there won't be any fighting!" and Ruth's cheeks paled. "I don't see how men can stand up and kill one another, even if they are mad. The killing don't do any good and makes everybody suffer so."

"Girls can't understand such things," and Bud's square jaws came together. "A man has got to fight sometimes, just to show that he is a man and not a cowardly dog that anybody with a foot can kick; and he has got to protect, even if he has to fight to do it, his own life and the lives of those dear to him. Why, even a mother wolf will fight to protect her young! I—"

But, at this moment, they came within hailing distance of the crowd in front of the house and the shouting back and forth made it impossible for Bud to finish the sentence; and, in another minute, they were in the midst of the excited men and women.

They found everybody greatly excited at the house. A couple of hours before one of the settlers from further down the Valley had galloped up to the rancho; and had told them that a friendly Indian had seen a body of some two or three hundred Mexican cavalry marching up the Valley, and that they had been sent by General Castro to drive the Americans out of the country and to destroy their buildings and to scatter and kill their cattle and horses; and that he had been sent to warn the settlers to flee to the protection of Captain Fremont, who was in camp with his men at the Buttes. Then, without dismounting, he had whirled his horse about and had galloped off to warn Jack Hopkins, a settler who had not been able to come to the Conroyal gala.

For a time, after the arrival of the picnickers, there was great confusion and excitement. Some of the men were for organizing a company of mounted riflemen then and there with which to defend their homes; others favored first placing their women and children under the protection of Fremont and then offering their services to him, arguing that they were too few in numbers to make an effective resistance and that, if they would successfully defend their rights, they must unite all their forces under the leadership of Captain Fremont, the only United States officer in the vicinity, and present a solid front, backed by the American flag, to the enemy. This latter counsel, strenuously advocated by Hammer Jones, Conroyal, Rex Holt and his father, at last prevailed; and the settlers all agreed to hurry back to their homes, get together as quickly as possible their movable valuables, and hasten with them and their women and children to the camp of Fremont at the Buttes.

Now there were hurried good-bys, the speedy mounting of horses, and soon the last guest had departed from the Conroyal rancho; and Iola's gala day, that had opened so auspiciously, had come to its unfortunate ending.

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE BUTTES

BY sunrise the next morning the Conroyal carretas were loaded, the oxen yoked to them, the mule-train packed, a small bunch of fat cattle herded ready to drive with them—they did not wish to come to Fremont empty handed—and the horses saddled and ready for mounting.

“All aboard for the overland express!” Mr. Conroyal shouted, when everything was ready for the start. “Last call! Start in three jerks of five lambs’ tails. All aboard!” and his big voice rang out jovially, as if abandoning his home was one of the jolly happenings of life.

Mrs. Conroyal, followed by Iola and Dill’s wife and the women servants now came out of the house, and, with white sorrowful faces, mounted their horses. It was hard for the women folks to say good-by to their home, knowing that they might never see it again.

Mr. Conroyal locked the doors and fastened the windows, and then sprang on the back of his big black stallion, Bilboa.

“Forward!” he cried, and waved his hand; and the trek for the camp of Fremont had begun.

Rex led White Cloud. He was not minded to let the noble old horse fall into the hands of the Mexican soldiers. His father rode by his side. Hammer Jones had left for the camp of Fremont an hour before, anxious to get back to his commander with the news of the coming of the Mexican soldiers as speedily as horse's legs could take him. Thure and Iola rode behind their father and mother; and behind them came the creaking carretas, the patient oxen straining in their yokes. Then followed the servants and the pack-mules and the vaqueros with the cattle and a small drove of horses.

The Buttes were some forty miles north of the Conroyal rancho; and, by urging the oxen, yoked to the carretas, and the pack-mules, our friends hoped to reach the camp of Fremont early in the afternoon of the second day. Ordinarily such a journey as this would have been considered as little less than a picnic by these hardy pioneers; for the women, as well as the men, were accustomed to long rides on horseback and to roughing it outdoors. But now, with the dread of being overtaken by the Mexican soldiers and the harrowing apprehensions of the coming hostilities ever present in their minds, no one could enjoy the beauties of the scenery or take pleasure in the exhilarating freedom of life out in the open air; and, consequently, when about the middle of the afternoon of the second day they caught their first glimpse of

the Buttes, the rocky formation that gave name to the place, it was a welcomed sight to all.

They found the valley surrounding the camp of Fremont already dotted with the camps of the American settlers, who had fled to him for protection, and more coming in all the time; for the news of the advance of the Mexican soldiers had been spread all over the Valley as fast as the swift legs of horses could carry it, and all the American settlers had at once turned to Fremont for protection and counsel.

"Look, there! See that man on the big iron-gray horse!" Thure exclaimed to Iola, as they neared the camp. "That is Captain Fremont. And the man standing near his horse's head talking to him, is Kit Carson. And there is Hammer Jones! See, he has recognized us!" and he caught off his hat and swung it in answer to the swinging hat of Hammer Jones.

"It must be great to know men like Captain Fremont and Kit Carson," Iola said, her eyes intent on the figures of the two men. "I have always wanted to know Kit Carson, because dad and Dill have told so many wonderful stories about him; and lately I have heard so much about Captain Fremont that I want to know him, too. I don't think either one of them looks so very terrible; and Kit Carson isn't nearly as big as Hammer Jones or Dad," and there was a touch of disappointment in Iola's voice.

"It isn't muscles and bones that make men leaders of other men," declared Thure. "It's—it's—well, it's brains, and being able to use them best when they are needed most—Hello! Looks as if Dad was going to camp here!"

Thure was right; for, as he spoke, Noel Conroyal halted his company on the summit of a little hill that looked down on the waters of the Rio de las Plumas a few rods above its confluence with the Sacramento River and something like a quarter of a mile from the camp of Fremont, and ordered the camp to be pitched there in a little grove of ever-green oaks, where there would be an abundance of wood for fuel and water and grass for the cattle and horses and high ground for the tents, camping points that no experienced mountaineer ever overlooked. Then he and Frank Holt and Rex and Dill rode forward to pay their respects to Captain Fremont.

"Come on, Iola," and Thure, followed by Iola, galloped after his father, calling out, as he did so: "We are coming, too, Dad!"

"All right! Only just keep a little in the background," laughed back Conroyal.

Captain Fremont had just returned from a long ride with Kit Carson over the surrounding valley, and was now seated on a log before his tent. Near him stood Kit Carson and Hammer Jones and a number of his deerskin-clothed riflemen. He arose, as our friends dismounted, and welcomed

each with a hearty shake of the hand. His blue eyes twinkled as he gripped the hand of Thure.

"Mr. Conroyal," he said, turning to Thure's father and still keeping his hold on the boy's hand, "I shall have to report this young man to you for rank disobedience of orders."

"What! How is that?" and Conroyal, with an angry frown on his face, turned his eyes on Thure's flushing countenance. "If my boy disobeyed your orders, he should have suffered the penalty. If you did not punish him, then I will," and his face hardened. "Now, tell me the circumstances."

"He has been punished," Fremont answered quietly. "I ordered all his weapons taken from him and himself placed under arrest."

"Thure," and there was shame and reproach as well as anger in his father's voice, "why have you not told me of this?"

"I—I" Thure's voice choked in his throat.

"But he received my pardon the moment I learned that his breach of discipline had been the means of saving my life," continued Fremont smiling; and then, still keeping fast hold of Thure's hand, he went on to tell how, during the attack on the Indian village, Thure had shot the Indian at the moment the Indian was about to discharge an arrow into his breast and the remarkable circumstances under which the shot had been made. "You have reason to be proud of this boy," he concluded,

as he released Thure's hand. "He has a quick brain in a cool head."

The look on Noel Conroyal's face during these words had changed from shame and wrath to one of unbounded astonishment.

"And you never told me a word about this!" he exclaimed, again turning his eyes on the red face of Thure. "Why?"

"I—I—" stammered Thure. "I did not want you to know that Captain Fremont had ordered me to give up my arms and had placed me under arrest, not even if my shooting the Indian had caused him to pardon me; and I begged Rex and Ham to say nothing to you about it—"

"Tew which we agreed," broke in Ham grinning, "'cause we wanted you tew hear th' tale from Captain Fremont's own lips; an' we knowed he'd tell you th' first time he saw you. I reckon he's jest a chip off th' old block, Con, an' so you'd better pardon him, same as th' Captain has," and Ham's eyes twinkled.

There was more than pardon in the eyes Conroyal now turned on Thure; but he only said gruffly: "Thure, I am more sorry than I can tell you to hear that you disobeyed the orders of your commanding officer. But, since Captain Fremont has been kind enough to overlook it, I can do no less. Only," and his countenance relaxed into a grin, "I reckon if you had not got that Indian, you

would have got about the worst thrashing from me a boy ever had."

Thure had not enjoyed this scene in the least; and now that his part in it was over, he made haste to get out of the lime-light as quickly as possible and stepped behind the huge body of Hammer Jones.

"Now, what about this rumored advance of the Mexican cavalry?" Fremont demanded the moment the greetings and the introductions were over. "The whole Valley seems to be thoroughly alarmed; and yet I can get no clear and definite information, except that a friendly Indian is reported to have seen some two or three hundred Mexican soldiers advancing up the Sacramento with the intention of driving out the American settlers and destroying their homes. My scouts have failed to discover any signs of the Mexicans; and I am unwilling to make any hostile move until the Mexicans give me just cause. As you all know the friendly relations between my government and Mexico at present are strained almost to the breaking point, and I must do nothing to precipitate that break. But, as an officer of the United States army, I consider it my duty, in the present unsettled condition of affairs in California, to offer the protection of their flag to all the citizens of the United States now living in the Valley, who feel that they need its protection. Every south wind that blows comes laden with rumors of war and hostile threats on the part of

the Mexicans; but, heretofore, they have proven as light and as untrustworthy as the winds that bore them. Now, I would like to find out what there is at the bottom of this last rumor."

"I reckon here's a man that can tell you; and he ain't no Injun, but a white man; and I know he's honest and his word is trustworthy. His name is Knight; and he's just come in from the south," and one of the settlers, followed by a large red-whiskered man, pushed his way through the crowd that by now had surrounded Fremont.

"Why, that's Jack Hopkins!" exclaimed Iola, who now stood close by the side of Thure behind Hammer Jones, the moment she saw the settler.

"Sure," agreed Thure. "And that big red-whiskered fellow behind him is Tom Knight, who lives down near the mouth of the Cosumnes River. We stopped over night at his place, when I went with dad to San Francisco last fall. He ought to know, if anybody knows, whether or not the Mexican soldiers are marching up the Valley, seeing that he lives so far south. Listen!" and both bent forward anxiously to catch the words of Mr. Knight, who was about to give his information to Captain Fremont.

"Yes," began Knight, in response to Captain Fremont's demand to know what he knew, "I reckon I can give you the ground on which this here rumor 'bout the coming of the Mexicans started, being that I've seen them Mexican soldiers

and talked with their officers," and he paused for an instant to note the effect of his words.

The crowd of circling men pressed closer, then stood expectantly silent, every eye on his face. Captain Fremont made a quick step to the man's side, his face alight with interest.

"Well," he demanded impatiently, "let us have your story, the meat of it as quickly as possible."

"Sartin," continued the red-whiskered man. "I'm a-going to give it to you just as fast as I can shoot it out of my mouth. Three days ago this here morning, I was out looking for some cattle down by the Big Elk Ford, which is where most folks going north cross the river, when I saw a big drove of horses, must have been two or three hundred of them, a-coming up the valley from the direction of the Big Elk Ford, under the charge of Mexican soldiers. Naturally this made me some curious, so I rode down to interview them soldiers. I found fourteen Mexican soldiers, commanded by a fellow by the name of Arce, a-driving them horses; and was told that they had been sent by General Castro to the Mission of San Rafael to get the horses and to bring them to Santa Clara, the general's headquarters; and that General Castro wanted the horses to mount a battalion of two hundred men, with which he was a-going to drive all the American settlers out of the Sacramento Valley and that when he had done this he was

a-going to fortify the Bear River Pass in the California Mountains and allow no more men from the United States to come into California. Ruther a big proposition for the Mexicans to tackle, I thought; but I said nothing; and knowing that you had got back, with your fighters along with you, I reckoned you'd like to know about this move of the Mexicans and about what General Castro was a-thinking of doing, so I hurried back home and getting a fresh horse started north to hunt you up. Now, I reckon, 'twas this big drove of horses, with the Mexican soldiers along with them, that that there Indian saw a long way off and took the whole of them for a lot of Mexican cavalry coming to clean out the Sacramento Valley."

"I fancy you are right," Fremont declared. "The Indian must have mistaken your big drove of horses for a body of cavalry. But," and the lines on his strong face hardened and his eyes glinted, "it would appear that their real purpose after all is to drive the Americans out of California. They only await the placing of men on the backs of the horses."

"Excuse me, Captain," and a brawny, deerskin-clothed frontiersman named Merritt took a step out from the crowd and faced Captain Fremont, "but, seein' as how General Castro is a-purposin' tew git Mexican soldiers astraddle of them hosses tew drive us Americans outten th' country, wouldn't it

be a right proper idee for us tew do th' straddlin' ourselves—tew, as it war, confiscate them hosses for th' good of th' Valley?"

A great shout of approval greeted the suggestion of the frontiersman. It was a sort of poetic justice that appealed to the hearts of nearly all of these rough men—to take the horses intended to be used against them for their own use.

"By th' long-eared Ananias!" grinned Ham, "'Twould sarve them Mexies right tew git them hosses from them; an' I'll be one tew do it."

"And I," yelled a dozen voices, as the crowd surged closer around Hammer Jones and Merritt.

"What do you say, Captain?" and the frontiersman turned an eager face to Fremont. "Say th' word, an' I'll git tewgather a dozen good men; an' we'll start after them hosses afore sunup tew-morrer. We can overhaul them hosses afore them Mexicans can git them tew Santa Clara; an' th' rest'll be as easy as ropin' tame steers. Them Mexicans won't fight. They care more for their own hides than they do for th' hosses."

For a moment Fremont stood silent, his eyes staring straight in front of him, but seeing nothing. Had the time come to make the first move? Apparently it had. And yet, was he prepared to assume the responsibility for such an act? Would his government support him in it? Would the private instructions brought him by Lieutenant Gillespie from the government and from his father-in-

law, Senator Benton, who, he well knew, wrote with the authority of the Washington administration back of him, authorize such a move? These and many other similar queries passed in swift review before his active brain, as he stood there, surrounded by those hardy, deerskin-clothed frontiersmen and settlers, thousands of miles from his home government, absolutely dependent upon his own judgment. He knew that, if these horses were captured, the act might be, nay probably would be, construed by the Mexican authorities as an act of war, and that, if war had not already been declared between the United States and Mexico, this act might precipitate the conflict—But, if the information Lieutenant Gillespie brought him, if the judgment of Senator Benton could be trusted, then hostilities between the two countries must have already begun. Yet, he had had no definite information that war had been declared. Dared he act without it? His lips closed tightly. Yes; for plainly his government intended him to act the moment there was cause to act; and this action of General Castro in gathering horses for the publicly declared purpose of mounting men with which to drive the Americans out of the country, gave him cause, justified the capture of the horses. He squared his shoulders and threw back his head.

“Choose your men, Merritt,” he said succinctly. “Only they must not come from the ranks of my men; and there must be no blood shed, unless shed

by the Mexicans first. I will not be responsible for the shedding of the first human blood."

"Hurra!" and the frontiersman jerked off his hat and threw it on the ground in front of him. "Who is with me?"

Almost instantly his hat was buried deep under the pile of hats that were showered down on the ground in front of him.

"Bully fellers every one on you; but a dozen th' likes of you is enough tew scare th' teeth outten them Mexicans, so I'll jest take twelve of you, what I know tew be good men an' straight shooters," and Merritt, as the men stepped forward to pick up their hats, selected twelve of the best men.

"Now, fellers," and Merritt turned to the twelve men, who now stood in a little group by themselves, "be ready tew start tew-morrer mornin' jest as soon as it is light enough tew see; an' ride your fastest an' most endurin' hosses. We will start from my camp, which is over thar in that bunch of evergreen oaks," and he pointed to a little clump of trees some two hundred rods distant. "Any further instructions, Captain?" and he turned to Captain Fremont.

"Yes," answered Fremont. "You and Mr. Knight and Kit Carson and Godey and Noel Conroyal and Frank Holt and Hammer Jones come with me to my tent. I wish to talk over this and certain other matters with you," and Captain Fre-



FREMONT'S HAT WAS INSTANTLY BURIED DEEP IN THE PILE OF HAIR

mont, followed by the men he had named, entered his tent.

"Say, but don't I wish I could go with Merritt and his men!" and Thure turned a face glowing with excitement to Iola the moment Fremont and his counselors disappeared in the tent. "I'd like to help capture those horses on which General Castro is going to mount men and drive us out of the Valley. What right has he to drive us out of the country? We settled here by permission of the Mexicans themselves and we have obeyed the Mexican laws. If they did not want us, they should not have let us settle here in the first place. Now, when we've bought our land and built our homes and got our ranchos stocked with cattle and horses, this General Castro is going to drive us out of the country, just because we are Americans, and take our lands and cattle and horses. The old robber! That is just what he is; and that is just what the Mexican government is that is backing him up in this. Yes, I'd like to help capture those horses. It will serve General Castro just right; and show him that we Americans are not broken to driving," and his young face glowed with the heat of his indignation at what appeared to him the injustice and despotism of General Castro and the Mexican government toward the American settlers.

"But Captain Fremont isn't going to let General Castro or anybody else rob us of our homes and

drive us out of the country," and Iola nodded her head positively. "I know, because his eyes look so true and determined. Now, I think we had better be going back to camp. It is almost sundown; and mother will worry, if we are not back before dark."

"I'd like to wait until dad and the others come out of Fremont's tent; but there is no telling when that will be; and, I reckon, mother might worry some," Thure admitted reluctantly, as he turned his face campward. "I knew something would be doing, when Fremont got back," he continued, as he and Iola mounted their horses and galloped off toward their camping-grounds.

They found everything in order at the camp, tents up, fires burning, supper ready to serve and the women folks complaining that the supper would spoil, if the men did not get back soon to eat it.

When Noel Conroyal returned to camp a couple of hours later, he at once called Thure to him.

"Captain Fremont," he said, "wishes to send a message to Captain Sutter at Sutter's Fort; and you have been chosen to carry it. You will go with Merritt and his men; and stay with them until after they have captured the horses, which should happen somewhere near Sutter's. Then you will go direct to Sutter's Fort, and deliver your message, and let him know how the effort to capture the horses turned out. Captain Sutter will probably wish to send a message back to Captain Fremont. If he does, you are to wait until it is ready, and

then return with it to Fremont as quickly as possible. You will go to the tent of Captain Fremont the first thing in the morning, to get the message and your final instructions. Is this all clear, my son?" and he laid one hand affectionately on Thure's shoulder and looked down, with a father's just pride, into the shining eyes and glowing face.

"Yes, dad," Thure answered. "I will be ready."

"Then you must get to bed at once; for Merritt will start as soon as it is light enough to see to travel. So off to your blankets."

But before rolling himself up in his blankets, Thure hurried to the tent where Iola and her mother had already retired; and, opening the flap a little, called his sister's name softly.

"What is it?" and Iola thrust her head a little ways out through the opening.

"I am going with Merritt and his men!" Thure whispered, triumph and gratification in every note in his voice. "I am to take a message from Fremont to Captain Sutter; and I am to stay with Merritt and his men until after the capture of the horses. Dad just told me."

"Oh! Do be careful and not get hurt," and Iola's arms were around Thure's neck.

"Sure," laughed Thure. "Now good-by, sis, if I don't see you in the morning," and he gave one of her plump cheeks a quick kiss and hurried away to his "blankets."

CHAPTER XVI

THE CAPTURE OF THE HORSES

THURE was the first one in the Conroyal camp to awaken the next morning. It was still dark; and, as he stepped outside of the tent in which he and his father and Frank Holt and Dill slept to see if the east was yet beginning to lighten with the approaching day, he was surprised to find a piece of white paper pinned by a long thorn to the outside of the tent near the opening. In a moment the paper was in his hand and he was hurrying to the still glowing coals of the camp-fire, to examine the paper by its light. The paper appeared to be cut from a larger sheet and was about six inches square. One side was blank, but, on the other side, Thure read these words, scrawled by an unpracticed hand across the center of the paper:

“Padilla never forgets or forgives.”

There was no signature.

For a minute Thure stood staring at the paper, then he rushed into the tent and awoke his father and the others; and, handing the paper to his father, told him where he had found it and what was written on it.

Conroyal took the paper, and, hurrying out to the fire, carefully examined it.

"Just a scare, I reckon," he said, as he dropped the paper into the fire and watched it burn. "But do not say anything about it to the women folks. They would worry about it, and would think something terrible had happened every time we did not get into camp the moment they expected us. You know how women are," and he smiled, but, in spite of his smile, there was an uneasy look in his eyes, as he turned to Thure and bade him go and get his horse.

Thure started off on the run after his horse; and, the moment he was out of hearing, his father's eyes sought the faces of Frank Holt and Dill anxiously.

"What do you make out of it, Frank?" he asked, the uneasy look in his eyes deepening.

"That a ball through the head of Padilla, when we had him in our power and good reason to back the shooting, would have saved us a lot of trouble," Holt answered, his face hardening. "Them words tell us that the skunk is camped on our trail, and is watching for a chance to get even for that cow-hiding we gave him, or else it's a Mexican bluff, just to give us a scare and to make us uneasy. I reckon it's a little of both; but we must be on our guard."

"That is about the way I look at it," Conroyal answered. "I am not afraid of Padilla coming out

in the open to do us any harm. He is too great a coward. He will be like a snake in the grass, and strike only when he thinks his own hide is safe. Now," and the troubled look on his face deepened, "I wish I had known about this before I told Fremont that Thure would take his message to Captain Sutter. He will be obliged to make part of the journey alone; and, if Padilla is on the watch, it will give him just the chance he is looking for."

"I will go in his place, dad," Dill volunteered promptly.

"No, I've given my word to Fremont and the boy will have to go; and, like as not, I am making a grizzly out of a coyote. But we must be careful not to let his mother hear anything about this paper, at least not until he gets back."

"Thure will be all right as long as he is with Merritt," Holt assured him; "and I will tell Merritt how things are, and he will see that someone goes along with the boy to the fort, so, I reckon, there won't be any special danger. Now," and he glanced toward the east, where the first light of day was beginning to show, "we must get a hustle on us, or Thure will be late to the rendezvous. I'll rout out the cook and get the breakfast going and you can see that his horse and outfit are all right."

A half an hour later Thure had eaten his hastily-cooked breakfast, had said his farewells to

his father and mother and the rest, including Iola, who was up to again caution him to be careful and to kiss him good-by, and, accompanied by Frank Holt, was on his way to the camp of Fremont.

They found Fremont standing by his camp-fire in front of his tent. He had his message ready, a sealed letter, which, with a word or two of caution, he handed to Thure and bade him deliver it into the hands of Captain Sutter and hasten back with his reply. With the message safely concealed inside the bosom of his shirt, Thure again mounted his horse and, still accompanied by his Uncle Frank, set out for the camp of Merritt.

Merritt and his twelve men were nearly ready to mount their horses and be off when Thure and his uncle reached the camp. Frank Holt at once called Merritt a little to one side and told him of Padilla and his threat, and asked him to send someone along with Thure when he left him to go to Sutter's Fort. This Merritt promised to do, and also to be on the lookout for stray Mexicans, and, if he caught sight of Padilla, to "tickle his ribs with a rifle bullet."

The first red banners of the sun were just beginning to glow ruddily above the tops of the eastern mountains, when Merritt gave the word and the little band of veteran frontiersmen sprang on the backs of their horses and started southward in quest of the Mexicans and the drove of horses on which General Castro proposed to mount the sol-

diers who were to drive the Americans out of the country. All that day they rode steadily, without seeing a human being, not even an Indian or a Mexican; and, when night came, they camped in the depths of a little grove of trees near water; and, before sunrise the next morning, were again riding swiftly southward.

They were now nearing the region where they expected to find Lieutenant Arce and the horses, and the summit of every rise of ground was cautiously approached and the country beyond carefully examined for a sight of the Mexicans and the horses; and, just as the first rays of the sun shot over the tops of the mountains, they came within sight of the camp of the Mexicans.

The camp was situated in a little grove of trees on the banks of a small stream of water. The indolent soldiers still lay in their blankets, apparently sound asleep. The horses were quietly feeding on the rich grass of the valley a short distance away, watched over by a drowsy mounted sentinel. Fortunately a little detour from the summit of the small hill from which the camp of the Mexicans had been first seen, would place the woods between the careless sentry and our little company and enable them to steal quietly down upon the camp and practically surround it unobserved.

"Looks as if they'd knowed we were a-comin' an' had planned everything so as tew make their capture sartin an' easy," Merritt chuckled, as his

keen eyes took in the situation. "Now jest follow me, an' make your hosses walk as if they were a-treadin' on eggs, when we git near th' camp; an' we'll give them Mexies 'bout th' biggest surprise they'll ever have this side of th' Day of Judgment," and, still chuckling, the frontiersman led his men around back of the hill, until they had passed behind the woods. Then, riding two abreast and slowly, so as to make as little noise as possible, he led them over the hill and down toward the Mexican camp.

When the woods were reached, Merritt had all the men dismount and carefully tie their horses to the trees. Then all began a slow and cautious advance through the woods, spreading out as they did so in such a manner as to half enclose the Mexican camp by the time they came to it.

The soldiers still slumbered in their blankets. The drowsy sentinel still sat on his horse, watching his charge, unsuspecting of danger, as, silently as shadows, the Americans glided from tree to tree, from point to point, until all were in position, where the rifle of each could command one of the Mexicans. Then Merritt strode a few steps forward, until he stood in the midst of the Mexican camp, and, throwing his rifle to his shoulder, leveled it at the sleeping form of Lieutenant Arce.

"Hi, thar!" he roared, in a voice that made the leaves on the trees tremble and brought every Mexican out of his blanket on the jump. "Surrender;

or we will shoot tew kill! We've got every man of you covered."

For one astounded moment, the Mexicans stood, open-mouthed and sallow-faced, staring with blinking eyes at the leveled barrels of the rifles, at the grim-faced deerskin-clothed men behind them. Then Lieutenant Arce turned a white face to Merritt.

"We surrender," he said, in a voice that he tried in vain to keep from trembling, while the angry light in his eyes showed that he, at least, would not have been adverse to fighting, had he been given the chance. "We nothing less can do with the rifles of your men pointed at our heads. But, what means this outrage the soldiers of Mexico against, who peaceably march through their own country? Mexico the insult shall know," and his tall slim form swelled with indignation and outraged pride.

"Sartin," grinned Merritt, "send in your report an' tell how we captured you all snoozin' in your blankets. Now," and his face hardened, "'bout your marchin' peaceable-like through your own country. You may call it peaceable-like tew be a-threatenin' tew drive all us Americans out of th' country an' tew be a drivin' some two hundred hosses tew your general for him tew put soldiers on their backs tew do th' drivin' out; but we are here tew convince you 'tain't a peaceable occupa-shun, not by a woods full of fightin' grizzlys. Just

let General Castro try the drivin' out business an' we'll show him how straight th' American rifles shoot. Now, tew git down tew th' present business. We ain't aimin' tew harm you none, that is if you continue in your peaceable-like intentions; but we want them hosses that you are a-takin' tew General Castro for him tew put men on their backs tew drive us Americans peaceable-like out of th' country, we want 'em so bad that we are jest a-goin' tew take 'em; an' if you've got any objections, you've got tew speak 'em out quick. Now, do we git them hosses peaceable-like, or do we git 'em by shootin'? That's th' p'int."

"I, General Castro, Mexico will of this insult—" began the angry officer.

"Dry up!" roared Merritt, taking a quick step toward the lieutenant. "It's th' hosses we want, not your languages."

"A brigand what he wants takes, at the rifle's mouth. The horses are yours," and, with a mocking bow and a wide sweep of his hands, Lieutenant Arce indicated his helplessness.

There was no more time wasted in talk. The Mexican soldiers were disarmed, a guard set over them; and then Merritt, with his remaining men, mounted their horses and rounded up the drove of horses. When this had been done, Merritt galloped back to where the Mexican soldiers stood under guard.

"Jest tell General Castro," he cried, pulling up

his horse in front of Lieutenant Arce, "if he wants his horses back tew come an' git 'em. He'll find 'em at th' camp of Captain Fremont; an' th' Captain 'll be powerful glad tew see him. Now, we've left each one on you a hoss; an' you are at liberty tew git back tew your general jest as fast as their legs'll take you. Come on, men," and, followed by the guard, he galloped off to where the drove of horses were already being driven rapidly northward.

This has been called the first act of open hostility in the conquest of California; and Fremont has been blamed for fathering it. But, on the other hand, there are those who think that the publicly declared purpose of General Castro to use these horses to mount a battalion of soldiers for the express purpose of driving the Americans out of California, was, in itself, a sufficient declaration of hostility to justify the capture of the horses. However, whatever the right or the wrong of the matter may be, there was not a man who helped make the capture, from Merritt down to Thure Conroyal, who did not believe the act justified; and, consequently, as they rode off with the horses, there were no prickings of the conscience, only jubilation over the fact that they had been able to make the capture so easily and safely.

Thure, during the excitement of the raid on the Mexican camp, had forgotten his mission; but

now that the horses had been captured, his mind turned to Fremont's message and its delivery.

"Captain Merritt," he said, galloping up to the side of the leader of the little party, "as you doubtless know, I have a message from Captain Fremont to deliver to Captain Sutter; and I was instructed to deliver it as soon as possible after the horses had been captured. Don't you think I had better be starting for Sutter's Fort? The fort can't be more than ten or fifteen miles from where we are; and I know the way there all right."

"Yes," agreed Merritt, "I reckon you had better be on your way. I'll have Hank Martin an' Long Dave ride with you; an' if you are right smart an' don't loiter none at Sutter's, you can overtake us afore we git back tew Fremont's camp. I reckon Fremont's got bigger game than hosses up his sleeve," and he smiled knowingly.

Ten minutes later Thure and Hank Martin and Long Dave were on their way to Sutter's Fort, then one of the best-known settlements in the Sacramento Valley; and, at the end of an hour, they had topped the last hill and the beautiful park-like valley, dotted with groves of evergreen oaks and walled in on the east and the west by lofty mountains, in the midst of which Captain John A. Sutter had built his fort, lay before them.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LONE RIFLE SHOT

THE Sacramento Valley, at the confluence of the Rio de los Americanos, as the American River was then called, and the Sacramento River, widens out into a great level plain that stretches almost as far as the eye can reach to the north and to the south and to the great walls of mountains on the east and on the west. Here, in 1840, came John A. Sutter; and, settling near the juncture of the two rivers, built what has since been known to fame as Sutter's Fort, not far from the present site of the City of Sacramento.

John A. Sutter was of Swiss parentage, born at Baden; but, emigrating to the United States, became a citizen of this country, and, finally found his adventurous way to California and to the Sacramento Valley. He secured a large grant of land from the Mexican authorities, built a strong fort to protect himself and men from the Indians, and gathered about him a number of white men and a great many Indians, whom he employed to till his great fields of grain and herd his large droves of cattle and horses and to do the other labor required

on his huge rancho. At the date of our story, 1846, he lived here like a king in his kingdom, a kingdom in a wilderness, dispensing hospitality to all who came; and nearly everyone, especially if he were an American, who came to California in those days headed straight for his place.

The fort itself was a huge open parallelogram, some five hundred feet long by a hundred and fifty feet wide, with thick walls built out of adobe or sun-dried bricks. Near the center of the enclosure thus made was the main building, the residence of Sutter himself. Along the inside of the four enclosing walls were rows of shops, store-rooms, barracks, etc. Bastions stood at the outer corners of the walls and were armed with cannon, so placed as to sweep in all directions. Two great gates, very strongly built and defended by heavy artillery protruding threateningly through portholes pierced in the walls, gave entrance to the fort, one on the east side and the other on the south side. Armed sentries always stood at these gates. Some fifty Indian soldiers, drilled by a white officer every night after their day's work was done, were trained to defend the place in time of need.

Such was the man, John A. Sutter, and such was the fort and its surroundings that Thure Conroyal and his two companions were now approaching. They rode swiftly across the valley, and, galloping up to the south gate, asked the sentry if Captain Sutter was within.

"He is," replied the sentry and swung the great gate open for them to enter.

Thure had been to Sutter's Fort several times with his father and knew Captain Sutter; and, as he passed through the gate, he saw the Captain, accompanied by three or four Indians and a couple of white men, walking across the court toward the east gate.

"Captain Sutter!" he called, pulling up his horse and leaping off his back, "I have a message for you from Captain Fremont," and, taking out Fremont's letter, he hurried toward the group of men.

Captain Sutter, at the sound of his name, turned quickly and at once advanced to meet Thure, his kindly face smiling a welcome.

"I am very glad to see you, my boy," he said, as he gripped Thure's hand in a warm clasp. "And how is the father and the mother and that black-eyed sister of yours?—Ah, you have a message for me and from Captain Fremont! I heard with great pleasure of the return of Captain Fremont. It may mean much to us Americans," and his keen eyes brightened. "Now, if you will pardon me, I will read the letter. I am anxious to know what Captain Fremont's message is," and, taking the letter from Thure's hand, he quickly broke the seal and read its contents, his face sobering and a frown gathering on his brows as he read.

"Well," and he turned abruptly to Thure, a look very much like anger on his face and in his eyes, "What about the horses? Did you capture them?"

"Yes, sir," Thure replied, flushing a little.

"Any shooting? Anyone hurt?"

"No, sir. We surrounded the Mexicans early this morning, while they were yet asleep in their blankets; and they surrendered without the firing of a gun."

"What was done with the soldiers? Were they held prisoners?"

"No, sir. Merritt left each one of them his own horse, taking only the ones belonging to the government, and told them to hurry back to General Castro and tell him that, if he wanted the other horses, he must come and get them."

"I am glad that there was no blood shed," and Captain Sutter's face cleared a little; "and that the soldiers were not made prisoners. But I do not think Captain Fremont ought to have taken those horses, at least not without first consulting with me. I do not believe that General Castro ever thought of mounting men on them for the purpose of driving the Americans out of California."

"But," interrupted Thure, his face whitening a little at his temerity. "Mr. Knight told Fremont that he himself heard Lieutenant Arce say that General Castro intended to use the horses to mount soldiers expressly for the purpose of driving us

out of the Sacramento Valley and that then he intended to fortify the Bear River pass to keep all Americans out of California."

"Tut, tut, General Castro is not fool enough to think that he could drive us Americans out of the Valley with a couple of hundred Mexican soldiers. It would take a thousand, yes, ten thousand of them! But, of course, Captain Fremont does not know all this. He probably has done what he thought was for the best; and then," and the frown left his face, "Lieutenant Gillespie may have brought him secret instructions from the government at Washington. Anyhow the thing is done now; and, my boy, it means war, war between the Americans and those loyal to Mexico, it means," and his eyes shone, "that this beautiful country, the most beautiful and fertile in the world, will become a part of the great United States—But, here I stand talking, and there you and your horses stand, wearied with your long journey. Hi, there! Hello! Peter, Luke, Mark and the rest of the apostles! You rascals, why have you not taken the horses of my friends, who have journeyed far and fast?" and Captain Sutter began scolding vociferously half a dozen tall Indian boys, who now appeared running from one of the many buildings that lined the inner side of the walls of the fort and, seizing the reins of their horses, hurried off with them, as if anxious to get out of the reach of the sounds of that angry voice as quickly as possible.

"The young rascals," and Captain Sutter turned a face now smiling with friendliness and hospitality to Thure and his two companions, "the only time they are ever on hand without calling is eating time. But, pardon my keeping you standing here so long. I got a little excited over the news. Now, come right into the house and rest yourselves," and he led the way into a large room, rudely furnished with a common deal table and a number of rough benches, evidently the dining-room.

"Excuse me, Captain Sutter," Thure said, as he seated himself on one of the benches, "but will there be any message to take back to Captain Fremont? If there is, he wished me to hurry back with it as soon as possible; and Merritt is expecting us to overtake him before night; so I think we had better be going as soon as our horses have had a short rest."

"I'll write the message at once," Captain Sutter said, "so that it will be ready whenever you are ready; but do not be in a hurry to go," and, going to a little cupboard built in the wall of the room, he got ink and pen and paper and, seating himself at the table, soon had his answer to Fremont's message ready.

For an hour Thure and his two companions sat talking with Captain Sutter. They found him intensely interested in the outcome of the trouble between the United States and Mexico and hopeful

that the result would leave California in the possession of the United States.

"Why," he declared, "even the better class of Californians themselves are disgusted with the rule of Mexico, and would be glad to see the country come into the possession of the United States or England. Yes, sir," and he brought his broad hand down on his knee with a resounding slap, "it's England or the United States! And now, thank God, it begins to look like the United States! There is more back of Fremont's return than we can see. I am told that his father-in-law, Senator Benton, is almost the power behind the throne at Washington; and, doubtless, Lieutenant Gillespie brought him secret instructions from Washington that has caused him to act as he has. He did not follow him into the depths of the wilderness for no light cause. Still I wish I could have had a talk with Captain Fremont before he precipitated matters by capturing those horses. But, however it is brought about, I will be mightily pleased to see the stars and stripes floating over this wonderful country. I am tired of Mexican rule. One can never tell where one is at under it, with a revolution changing the laws and the ruler every few months."

"That is exactly the way Dad feels," Thure asserted. "He says that a change of rulers is the only hope for the country; and, of course, he wants that change to mean Uncle Sam for us. Now,"

and he turned to Long Dave and Hank Martin, his two companions, "don't you think we had better be going?"

"I reckon so," answered Long Dave, "if we're tew overtake Merritt afore dark. So jest have them apostles of yourn trot out our horses," and he turned to Captain Sutter.

"Sorry that you must be going," and the hospitable Captain rose regretfully and, summoning the tall Indian boys, soon had their horses before the door, standing ready for them to mount.

"I'll give your message to Captain Fremont as soon as I reach his camp," Thure said, as he and his two companions swung themselves up into their saddles.

"And tell him," Captain Sutter spoke in a low voice, so that only Thure could hear, "that, when we Americans know that war has been declared between the United States and Mexico, he will find the rifle of every loyal American in California back of him. But we want to know that the United States will support us, before we cast our glove into the face of Mexico. We are hardly strong enough yet," and his face clouded, "to carry a revolution through to a successful issue on our own account. That is why this horse raid troubles me," and the frown on his face deepened. "If Fremont has acted too hastily, it will be a pretty serious business for us Americans in California. But he must have had secret information and in-

structions. Anyway it is done now, and we must make the best of it. Now," and he raised his voice, "be on your guard against any stray bands of Mexicans. They'll be out looking for revenge as soon as they hear of this capture of the horses; and 'twill go hard with the first Americans who fall into their hands."

While Captain Sutter had been speaking they had been moving slowly toward the gates of the fort; and, by this time, they had reached the opened gates.

"Thank you," Thure said. "We will be on our guard. Good-by," and striking spurs into their horses' flanks, he and his two comrades galloped off.

"A safe journey to you!" Captain Sutter called after them; and then the gates of the fort swung shut and the strong walls hid him from sight.

"Do you think that we can now overtake Merritt before night?" Thure asked, as he settled down in his saddle for the long ride.

"Sartin," answered Long Dave. "'Twas consider'ble south of th' fort that we captured th' hosses; an' drivin' tew hundred hosses ain't no fast work. We otter come up with 'em 'bout th' middle of th' afternoon."

For many miles the valley lay before them almost as level as a floor and over this they traveled swiftly; but, a little after noon, they came to where the going was rougher and the rocks of the moun-

tain sides came down close to the valley. At one place the trail passed within a hundred yards of where a deep wooded ravine split its way through the almost precipitous side of a mountain.

"That would be a mighty good place for an ambush," and Long Dave pointed his finger uneasily toward the piles of rocks and clumps of bushes and trees that concealed the mouth of the ravine. "Now, if some of our Mexican friends—"

He stopped abruptly; for, at that instant, just as they were abreast of the mouth of the ravine, a puff of smoke shot out in front of the nearest pile of rocks, the report of a rifle sounded in their ears, and Thure, with a startled cry, tumbled forward in his saddle.

"Git out of this!" yelled Long Dave, digging his spurs into his horse.

Thure, clung tremblingly to the pommel of his saddle, and Hank Martin needed no urging to put as great a distance as possible as speedily as possible between them and the mouth of the ravine; but there came no other shot and their anxious eyes could see no sign of movement in the dark opening of the ravine. When they had reached a safe distance Long Dave pulled up his horse.

"Are you hit?" and he turned anxiously to Thure, who still clung to the pommel of his saddle, his face very white.

"I—I think so," stammered the boy, straightening up in his saddle; "but not badly."

"Sufferin' Moses, but that's what I call a powerful close shave!" and Long Dave stared in astonishment at the back of Thure's coat. "Th' ball has cut clean across the back of your coat like it had been done with a sharp knife! Four inches more tew th' front an' you'd a-ben a dead one at this moment. I reckon it burnt your back a leetle?"

"It sure did," and the blood came rushing back into Thure's face. "For a moment I thought he'd got me."

"It jest broke th' skin at th' tips of both shoulder-blades! Now, what dew you think of that for a narrer squeak?" and he turned to Hank Martin.

"I reckon you was borned tew be hanged, Thure," and Hank grinned, "leastwise shootin' don't seem tew be good enough for you. Now, who could have fired that shot? Th' cowardly skunk!—By thunder, there he is now!" and he pointed excitedly off toward the mouth of the ravine, just as a man jumped up on top of the pile of rocks, whence the shot had come, and began shaking his fist threateningly at them.

Both men instantly spurred their horses toward him; but, before they could get within rifle-shot, he leaped down from the rocks and vanished, with a derisive yell, in the bushes and trees of the ravine.

"Thar might be a dozen or more in thar," and Long Dave pulled up his horse. "I reckon we

don't care none 'bout investigatin' that thar ravine, Hank!"

"I reckon not, Dave."

As the two men turned back, Thure asked a little excitedly: "Did you recognize that man?"

"No," Hank answered. "Only 'twas a cowardly skunk of a Mexican."

"I—I think I know who it was," and Thure's eyes glinted angrily. "I am not absolutely certain, but I am quite sure it was Padilla, the Mexican dad gave a horsewhipping for running off with Iola. At least he looked just like him from where I was, though of course I couldn't see his features," and then he told the two men the story of his father's trouble with Padilla and of the note he had found pinned to the tent on the morning of their departure from the camp of Fremont.

"He's th' cur," Long Dave declared decisively, when Thure had finished with his story. "I know that Padilla, an', come tew think on it, th' man on th' rocks did look a sight like him. If I was your dad, I'd shoot th' cur on sight, same as I would a p'isen snake."

Fortunately Thure's hurt was so slight that it caused him no other inconvenience than a stinging pain at the points of his shoulder-blades, where the bullet had clipped off a piece of skin about the size of a cent from each shoulder, and did not interfere in the least with his riding. Consequently they

at once continued on their way as swiftly as the trail would permit their horses to travel; and, a little before sundown, they had the satisfaction of overtaking Merritt and his men just as they were about to go into camp.

The next day, near the middle of the afternoon, they reached the camp of Fremont with the captured horses; and were received with such wild cheering by the Americans who had gathered there that the horses were nearly stampeded with fright.

Thure rode direct to Captain Fremont and gave him Captain Sutter's message.

Captain Fremont at once broke the seal and read the letter; and Thure, who sat on his horse watching him, saw his face darkening with a frown as he read, and rightly surmised that Captain Sutter had expressed his views in the letter concerning the capture of the horses a little too freely to please him. However Fremont gave no voice to his feelings, whatever they were; but, thanking Thure for the faithful discharge of his duty, told him that he was at liberty to return to the camp of his father.

In the meantime a great crowd of excited men had gathered around Merritt, who, standing on a rock, was making them a characteristic speech; and Thure on his way back to the home camp stopped for a few minutes to listen to him and to watch the crowd. Merritt was telling them that now that actual hostilities had begun the Americans must act promptly, that the advantage in a fight was al-

ways with the one who got in the hard blows first, that they must not wait for the scattered Mexican soldiers to gather in an army large enough to crush them, but must strike them in details while they were scattered, and his suggestion that the next blow be struck at Sonoma, where there was a small garrison of Mexican soldiers, was received with a great shout of approval. Thure was too anxious to get back to camp to wait to hear more; but, as he rode away, the shouts of "On to Sonoma! On to Sonoma!" rang in his ears.

A great many settlers had come in to the Fremont camp during Thure's absence and among them had come the Randolph family. They had pitched their camp only a short distance from the Conroyal camp; and Thure was greatly pleased to find Ruth and Bud Randolph with Iola when he rode into camp. They greeted his coming with loud shouts of welcome, and soon he was in the midst of an excited group, made up of the three youngsters and the women folks, with the servants in the background, recounting to them his adventures during the past three days. The men were all at Fremont's camp.

Thure said nothing of the shot from the ravine, not wishing to frighten his mother; but, just as he had completed his narration, the sharp eyes of Iola suddenly spied the peculiar rent in the back of his coat.

"What is this?" she cried, as her quick fingers

began an investigation of the cut in the garment.

Thure tried to wriggle out of her grasp; but, before he could do so, Iola uttered a startled scream.

"O, you are hurt! Your shoulders are all bloody!" and the horrified girl nearly fainted at sight of the blood that had flowed quite freely from the two small wounds on Thure's shoulders.

"It's nothing, nothing but a couple of scratches," declared Thure vehemently; but his mother would take no denials, until, with trembling fingers, she had examined the wounds herself and assured herself that they were really harmless.

Thure now had to tell what had caused the cut in the back of his coat and the wounds on his shoulder-blades; and he had just finished the telling, when his father, accompanied by Frank Holt and Rex and Dill and Hammer Jones, hurried up.

"What is this I hear about your being shot at by Padilla?" demanded Conroyal, the moment he caught sight of Thure. "Let me see your back," and, catching hold of Thure, he examined the bullet marks with angry eyes and a whitening face. "It's just as Long Dave said, four inches more to the front and he'd have got my boy!"

"We otter have shot th' skunk, when we had him in our power," and Hammer Jones shook his head regretfully. "'Twould have saved us a deal of worry. Thar's only one safe way of dealin' with that kind of a bad Mexican, an' that's th' lead an'

powder way. But, thar ain't no use of lookin' for cream after th' milk is spilt. Th' thing tew dew now is tew be sure an' git th' first shot, th' next time any on us sees Padilla."

"You are right, Ham," and Noel Conroyal's face hardened. "This cowardly shot at a boy has forfeited all of Padilla's rights to live. I will shoot him at sight, the same as I would a mad dog, since it is impossible to bring him to justice otherwise in the present troubled condition of affairs. Thank God, there is good reason to hope that the Mexican rule in California is nearing its end! Merritt and a party of settlers are to undertake the capture of Sonoma to-morrow. This means that the conquest of California has begun, means that soon we will be living again under the dear old stars and stripes; for I am sure that Fremont, the United States, is back of all this sudden activity, though Fremont will take no active part in it himself or allow his men to do so."

"Do you—do you think there will be any fighting in Sonoma?" Thure asked, an anxious note in his voice. "You know we have a lot of friends living there, and some of them are Californians—Miguel Vallejo and a number of others."

"No, I do not think there will be any fighting," his father answered. "General Vallejo, who is in command there, has always been a good friend of us Americans, and has long felt that it would be good for California to come under the control of

the United States; and I do not think he would care to offer any resistance, even if he were strong enough to do so, which, with the present weak garrison at Sonoma, he is not. Anyhow our friends, all non-combatants, will be safe and no private property is to be taken or destroyed. Dill and I are going along and we will be on the lookout for them."

"Can I go with you? Please, father, let me go with you! I—I am almost as big as a man, and I want to do something to help win California for the United States. Please let me go," and, in his eagerness, Thure caught hold of his father's arm and looked up so pleadingly into his face that Conroyal, who could yet look at things from a boy's point of view, yielded. Besides he felt that there would be little danger and that it would do the boy good to witness these stirring scenes, when history was being made for California.

"I reckon it will be all right to let the boy go, mother," and he turned to Mrs. Conroyal. "There is not likely to be any fighting; and I will keep my eye on him."

"Hurrah!" yelled Thure, jumping to his feet and swinging his hat around his head, not waiting to hear what his mother said, "I am going to help capture Sonoma! Say," and he turned quickly to Bud Randolph, "just scoot over to your camp and ask your dad if you can't go along, too."

"Sure!" and Bud jumped to his feet and started

like a tow-headed streak of dun-colored lightning for the Randolph camp. In ten minutes he came running back, swinging his hat and hip-hurrahing excitedly.

“I can go!” he shouted, as he dashed panting up to where Thure stood. “Dad is going and he says I can go with him. Now I must go right straight back to camp. Dad wants me to help him get ready. See you in the morning. Hurrah for Sonoma!” and he was off on the run for his own camp again.

CHAPTER XVIII

SONOMA

SONOMA, at that date, was but a small town, recently founded by General Vallejo near the site of one of the old missions in a beautiful valley some fourteen miles from the northern shore of the Bay of San Francisco; and was the home and the military headquarters of its founder, General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, military commander of all the Mexican Territory north of Monterey. The Mexican authorities had established a small military post here, which, at that time, was garrisoned by a few poorly equipped Mexican soldiers.

The Americans were quick to see the advantage that the capture of General Vallejo and his military headquarters would give them; and, acting with the usual American promptness, had organized the expedition, in the manner already narrated in the preceding chapter, to effect the capture, the moment the action of General Castro and the taking of the Mexican horses by Merritt made it certain that hostilities were about to begin.

When Thure and his father and Dill reached the camp of Merritt early the next morning, they found some thirty men already assembled there, ready

to start for Sonoma; and a rougher-looking set of men Thure thought that he had never seen. The majority of them were hunters, men who cared little for their personal appearance, who let their hair and beard grow long and who dressed in buckskin clothes, usually of their own rude tailoring. But Thure knew that braver men than these never lived and that their roughness and uncouthness were only skin deep.

Bud Randolph and his father were already at the rendezvous; and the two boys got together at once.

"Look!" exclaimed Bud, almost the moment the boys met. "Merritt is getting ready to get on his horse, so I reckon we are about to start."

"Yes, it's now for Sonoma and a free California!" and Thure's eyes sparkled.

"Everybody ready?" shouted Merritt at this moment, leaping into his saddle.

"Yes," answered a dozen tongues.

"Then, on for Sonoma!" and he struck the spurs into his horse's flanks and, followed by some thirty-three men, galloped off in the direction of Sonoma, accompanied by the cheers of Fremont's men and the loud shouts of the settlers, who continued to cheer and shout and wave their hats until the cavalcade had passed from sight over the brow of a little hill a mile or more away.

The ride to Sonoma was a long one, but all the riders were hardened horsemen, and there was no

lagging. All of that day and all of the next day they rode steadily southward; and then, a little before sundown on the second day, Merritt pulled up his horse and pointed toward a distant range of low-lying hills.

"Sonoma," he said, "lies jest about a couple of miles beyond them hills, somethin' atween eight an' ten miles from whar we be. Now, I reckon, we'd better camp right here an' have a good night's rest afore we tackle th' Mexicans. Then we'll feel fresh an' chipper an' ready tew fight, if we must; an', if we make an early start, I reckon we can get thar afore th' lazy Mexicans are up an' can take them by surprise. Leastwise that's th' way it 'pears tew me," and he glanced at the faces of his men, and, seeing nothing but approval of his suggestion there, jumped off the back of his horse. The tired men gladly followed his example, and the camp for the night was made then and there.

Thure and Bud slept side by side that night; and it seemed to both tired lads as if they had hardly closed their eyes, when they were rudely shaken out of their sleep by strong hands gripping them by the shoulders.

"Come, turn out, if you are going to Sonoma with the rest of us, both of you," and Noel Conroyal, a hand gripping the shirt collar of each boy, suddenly jerked them out of their blankets and stood them, winking and blinking and rubbing their eyes, on their feet.

The camp was already astir. The fires were crackling and blazing, the coffee pots were boiling and the meat roasting and the horses were being saddled and bridled and all the varied activities of the camp were in motion. The day was yet dark, only a faint light showed in the east, and the chill of night was still in the air.

"Well, if we ar'n't sleepyheads!" Thure exclaimed disgustedly, the moment his eyes had taken in this scene of picturesque activity.

"Sure," laughed Bud. "Now, let's see who can get the sleepyseeds out of his eyes first," and he started on the run for the small stream of water that flowed by the camp.

There was no lagging in camp that morning. The men, refreshed by their night's rest, were in high spirits, and everyone was anxious to get to Sonoma as quickly as possible. Accordingly, as soon as the hastily prepared breakfast was eaten, Merritt gave the word and the men swung themselves up on the backs of their horses and the march on Sonoma was resumed.

"I hope there won't be any fighting," Thure said, as the two boys galloped along side by side through the cool morning air. "We have so many friends in Sonoma; and it would be terrible if—if," he hesitated, "if some of them should get hurt and maybe by our own bullets. I hope Miguel Vallejo and his folks won't take sides against us. It would seem awful to have to fight one's own friends. I hope

the town will surrender without any fighting," and his face paled a little at the thought of what a fight at Sonoma might mean.

"But, if the Mexicans refuse to surrender, then we will have to fight them," Bud declared. "And, if our friends get on the wrong side, then our friends will be to blame for their own hurts, if they get any. However, I don't think there will be any fighting. I know Merritt and most of the men expect to take the town without firing a shot. They are counting quite a little on the friendliness of General Vallejo to the Americans and the weakness of the garrison. They are not in any condition to resist, especially if we take them by surprise. I know, because I heard Merritt and some of the men talking it over just before we left Fremont's camp; and Merritt, while he did not say so out and out, gave the men to understand that Captain Fremont was really back of the movement and that the United States was back of Fremont. All the men seem to think that Lieutenant Gillespie brought Fremont secret instructions from his government to begin hostilities the moment the Mexicans gave him the slightest grounds to do so, and that Fremont knows that war must have begun before this between the United States and Mexico, although no news of the outbreak of war has yet reached us."

"Yes, that's the way dad and Hammer Jones and Rex think," Thure agreed. "But Captain Sutter thinks that Fremont has been in too much

of a hurry, that, if it should turn out that war had not begun between the United States and Mexico, it would go hard with us Americans in California. But I am sure that Captain Fremont knows exactly what he is doing; and that everything will come out all right in the end. He is not the kind of a man to make mistakes of this kind. When we were in the woods he seemed to be always thinking and planning something, and, I reckon, this is what he was thinking and planning about. Anyhow the thing is started now, and we have all got to make the best of it."

By this time the cavalcade had reached the foot of the hills that lay between them and Sonoma; and here Merritt called a halt, while he and Noel Conroyal and a number of his best men dismounted and crept up to the top of the hills to reconnoiter. In a few moments they returned and reported the town evidently still asleep; for the sun had but just risen above the tops of the eastern mountains, and the Mexicans are not early risers.

Sonoma is immediately surrounded by a nearly level plain, which offers little concealment to an approaching body of men; but, fortunately for our friends, at the date of our story, this plain was dotted here and there with small groves of trees. One of these groves lay almost directly between them and the town, a fact which the keen eyes of Merritt and his men were quick to note.

"Th' town's not more'n tew miles from th' top

of the hill," Merritt explained to his men, as they crowded around him; "an' atween th' town an' th' hill th' good Lord has caused tew grow up a grove of trees, ahind which we can safely approach th' town tew within three or four hundred yards. Now, my idee is tew ride up cautious-like ahind that grove; an' charge from thar, like a herd of stampedin' buffalos, right down upon th' town as fast as our horses' legs can take us. I reckon we'll be in th' town an' have the Mexicans covered with our guns afore any on 'em wakes up sufficient to think of shootin'. Any one got any better plan?" and he glanced swiftly over the faces of his men.

"We're satisfied with yourn," volunteered one of the men. "Now let us git a-goin'."

"Good. Jest fall in tew abreast ahind me," and Merritt led the way up the hill and down into the valley on the other side, being careful to keep the grove of trees between them and the town all the time.

When the grove was reached, he again halted his men, and, for a few minutes, all sat silent on their horses listening intently. Not a sound could they hear from the still apparently sleeping town.

"Now, remember," and Merritt spoke sternly, "thar's tew be no shootin', unless th' Mexies start it, an' then you're tew shoot tew kill; an' thar's tew be no disturbin' private persons or property.

Now, we'll divide an' charge 'round both sides of th' grove tew once an' come tewgether on th' other side. Conroyal, you lead th' men round th' right side an' I'll take 'em 'round th' left side."

The men were now quickly divided into two companies, with Merritt at the head of the one and Noel Conroyal at the head of the other.

"Charge!" cried Merritt; and the two companies swung round the grove and out into the open in front of Sonoma, and then, uniting, swept on in full gallop toward the town. No one cheered, no one spoke; and the first thing to tell the Mexicans that they were coming was the sound of the thudding of their horses' hoofs, as they rushed through the streets of the town and on into the plaza publica, or public square, around which, as in nearly all Mexican towns, most of the buildings were erected.

"Halt! Form in lines facin' th' four sides of th' plaza!" shouted Merritt, the moment the square was reached.

When the startled soldiers and the equally startled citizens rushed to their doors and windows, they saw a line of stern-faced rifle-armed men facing them, sitting on panting foam-covered horses, with every rifle cocked and held ready for instant use.

There was no resistance offered. The surprise was too thorough and too complete.

General Vallejo, at the sound of the trampings of the horses and the voices of the men in the plaza, hurried to the door of his house.

"What is the meaning of this? Why these armed men?" he asked, glancing over the rough-looking company of armed horsemen, with eyes sparkling with indignation. "Why have you come charging into a peaceable town in this rough and threatening manner? What is it you wish? Have you taken the town?" and his angry eyes turned to Merritt, sitting on his horse almost directly in front of him.

"I reckon we have, General," Merritt answered tersely.

Without a word General Vallejo turned and entered the house. In a couple of minutes he returned, his sword girded to his side which he offered to Merritt in token of surrender.

"Keep your sword, General," and Merritt waved the weapon back. "Your word is good enough for us. You an' your officers an' soldiers are our prisoners, prisoners of war. Now, we want a talk with you an' your officers, General."

"My poor house is at your service," and General Vallejo bowed courteously. "You and your men can enter and we will hold a council, a council of war, shall we call it?" and the General smiled ironically.

"You and Knight come with me," and Merritt, turning to a tall man sitting on a horse near him,

dismounted, and, accompanied by the two men he had indicated, entered the house with General Vallejo, who received them with courtesy and instantly despatched messengers to summon to his house the other Mexican officers who were in the town.

"Great Christmas, but isn't he tall!" Bud exclaimed, as the tall man dismounted and straightened himself up preparatory to entering the house with Merritt. "Why, he must be seven feet high! Who is he?" and his eyes followed the tall form into the house with wondering admiration.

"What! Don't you know who he is?" and Thure looked his surprise. "I thought everybody around here knew Doctor Robert Semple, the tallest man in California. He is educated and can talk almost as well as a minister; but he likes to go around dressed like a hunter in buckskin, with a foxskin cap on his head and a rifle in his hand. They do say that he can shoot straight, too."

"He's the tallest man I ever saw," Bud declared, as the object of his admiration disappeared in the house. "Is he a sure-enough doctor?"

"I reckon so," Thure replied.

"Well, I hope I never fall into his hands," Bud exclaimed so fervently that Thure laughed.

The Americans, now that Sonoma had surrendered, relaxed their vigilance and, dismounting, gathered in groups in different parts of the plaza, while a number of the bolder Mexicans gathered curiously around each group.

"I wonder where Miguel is," Thure said, as the boys dismounted and led their horses toward the group where their fathers were standing. "I have been trying to catch sight of him ever since we entered the plaza. I should think all this excitement would bring him out."

"There, there he is now!" exclaimed Bud, pointing to one of the windows in the Vallejo house. "Hello! Hello! Vallejo, hello!" and both boys began waving their hands and beckoning to young Vallejo to come out where they were.

"I can't," he called back; "but you can come in and see me."

"Can we?" and both boys turned eagerly to their fathers, who willingly gave them permission when they understood what it was that they wanted.

Miguel Vallejo opened the door for his two young friends. There was an anxious questioning look on his face, as he hurriedly conducted them to a large room in the back part of the house.

"Now," and his dark face and eyes glowed with excitement, as he spoke, "quickly tell me what means this coming of you armed Americanos into our quiet little town. Why have you made prisoners of our General and his officers and his soldiers? Is it that war has been declared between the United States and Mexico? We are friends. You can speak freely; for glad will I be if the great United States is to rule our beautiful Cali-

fornia; and I know that General Vallejo and my father and many of the best people among the Californians really feel the same way. I know; I have heard them talk."

"No, we do not know that war has been declared between the United States and Mexico," Thure answered, a little hesitatingly. "We—we just—"

And then the door of the room opened and General Vallejo, accompanied by a number of his officers and the Americans, Merritt, Semple and Knight, entered the room; and Thure was spared the embarrassment of attempting further to answer the rather difficult questions propounded by his young Californian friend.

General Vallejo smiled and nodded to Thure and Bud and Miguel; but he did not order them from the room, as the boys feared that he might; and, consequently, taking it for granted that they were to be permitted to remain, they retreated to the farther end of the room and, seating themselves upon a bench, watched what followed with the greatest of interest.

Near the center of the room was a large table, with a number of chairs around it; and around this table General Vallejo and the men with him seated themselves; and then General Vallejo, summoning his servants, ordered refreshments brought.

"We will drink to each other's good health," he said courteously, as the refreshments were brought

into the room and placed on the table; "and thus come to the task before us with refreshed minds and bodies."

As they were about to raise their glasses to their lips the door of the room opened again and a Mexican officer hurried in. At the sight of this officer Merritt set his glass down so abruptly that its loud thud, as it came in contact with the table, startled all in the room and caused every eye to turn in his direction. He was glaring at the officer, who had stopped midway to the table, with eyes that glinted the wrath within, while his right hand had clenched itself so tightly that the knuckles showed white and hard. For a moment he looked as if he were about to hurl himself upon the officer and strike him down where he stood.

Everybody in the room sprang to their feet. Even the three boys jumped up from the bench where they had been sitting and stared with whitening faces at Merritt and the officer. For a tense moment no one spoke nor moved; then Merritt suddenly straightened up, threw back his head and strode straight up to the officer, who took a sudden startled step backward, while his face went white.

"When I was your prisoner—" Merritt had stopped within three feet of the officer and spoke in a low tense voice— "and in your power, you struck me, beat me with th' flat of your sword, as if I was a dog, 'cause I had helped an unfortunate English sailor tew git away from his brutal cap-

tain an' had refused tew give him up, accordin' tew your wicked Mexican laws. But now you are my prisoner and in my power, an' I—" Merritt paused for a moment and his hands clenched and unclenched themselves rapidly—"An' I WILL NOT STRIKE YOU, 'cause I can 'low no private feelin's tew git in atween me an' my public duty. I am an American; an' we Americans don't think it square tew use our office power tew wipe out a private wrong," and he whirled suddenly about on his feet, strode back to the table, picked up his glass and drank its contents. "Now, we'll git down tew business," and he sat down.

At a motion from General Vallejo, the officer, whose entrance had been the occasion of this dramatic scene, seated himself; and the work of preparing the articles of capitulation went on without any further interruptions, for the time being, except that caused by the too frequent clinking of glasses and the gurgling of liquor, furnished so generously by the hospitable prisoner-host.

By this time the three boys had become a little restless and uneasy. They wished to do some talking themselves; but, of course, this they dared not do where they now were for fear of disturbing their elders.

"Don't you think we had better go into some other room?" Thure at last ventured; "or, better, out into the plaza where the men are? I am sure your folks will let you go with us now, Miguel,

that there is no danger of there being any fighting."

"Yes," agreed Miguel. "Come on; we'll go and ask mother," and the three boys crept as quietly as possible from the room.

The boys found no trouble in persuading Miguel's mother to allow him to go with them out into the plaza, now that she was convinced that there would be no fighting; and they at once hurried out of the house and into the plaza, where they found the men becoming just a little impatient over the protracted absence of their leader.

"Well," demanded Conroyal, the moment he caught sight of Thure, "What's going on inside that's keeping them so long? If Merritt don't show up before long, we'll have to send a messenger in after him."

The boys told all they knew of what was "going on inside," and this pacified the men for a little while; but only for a little while. Soon their impatience broke out again.

"I'm tired of standin' here doin' nuthin' an' knowin' nuthin'!" yelled one, jumping to his feet and swinging one arm oratorically around his head. "I move that we send someone intew th' house tew find out what's doin' in thar."

"Second the motion!" shouted another; and the yell of approval that followed made the putting of the motion unnecessary.

"Carried unanimous," declared the first speaker. "Now, who shall we send?"

"Grigsby! Grigsby! Send Grigsby! He's the man to send!" yelled a dozen voices.

"I reckon it is up tew you, Grigsby," and the self-appointed chairman turned to a large man standing a little ways from him, "tew go in an' git th' news. Now, don't let that house swaller you up, tew; or thar's apt tew be an eruption out here that'll bring you all out a-whoopin'."

Grigsby accepted the mission; and disappeared in the Vallejo house.

For half an hour the men waited, glaring at the silent impassive front of the Vallejo house; but no Grigsby came from its doors. Then they could control their impatience no longer.

"Now, I think we've stood for this thing jest 'bout long enough," growled one. "Thar sartin is somethin' queer goin' on in that house, an' we otter know what it is; an' I move that we do know, if we have tew bust in th' doors tew find out."

"An' we will know if we have tew knock down th' hull front of th' house," angrily declared the one who had acted as chairman when Grigsby had been sent in, again with the oratorical flourish of his arm, "I move that we send in William B. Ide tew discover what's a-holdin' our leaders; an' if he ain't out ag'in in ten minits by th' watch, that we all bust in th' doors an' windows an' find out what's doin' in thar for ourselves!"

"Good!" yelled a dozen voices. "If he ain't out and right here where we can talk to him ag'in

in ten minits, we'll all go in after him. Ide! Ide! Ide!"

"I'll go," Ide shouted in response; "and, if I am alive and free, I'll be back inside of ten minutes," and he, too, entered the Vallejo house.

A man with a big silver watch in his hand stationed himself in front of the house and called off the minutes, while the Americans gathered in a solid mass behind him, ready to make a rush the moment the ten minutes were up.

"One minute!—Two minutes!—Three minutes!—Four minutes!—Five minutes!" called the man.

All eyes were on the closed door of the Vallejo house now, and many of the men were crowding closer.

"I—I must get inside, to mother," and Miguel Vallejo turned a white anxious face to Thure. "If all these wild-looking men should break into the house, she would be frightened. I must go to her," and he started toward the door.

"Six minutes!—Seven minutes!" shouted the man.

"Wait," and Thure caught hold of Miguel's arm and pulled him back. "I hear voices. Someone is surely coming."

"Eight minutes!—Nine minutes!" cried the man with the watch. "Ten—"

The door was thrown violently open and Ide rushed out, flourishing a paper in one hand, with Merritt and the tall Doctor Semple close behind

him and behind them the two other Americans and the Mexican officers, with the stately form of General Vallejo bringing up the rear.

In an instant all was confusion and excitement. Everybody tried to talk at once, with the result that, for a time, nobody understood anybody. But at last Ide managed to make the men understand that the papers which he held in his hand were the articles of capitulation, that he had found Merritt and the other high contracting parties still poring over them, while they still continued to pour much good liquor down their throats, that, in his indignation, he had seized the papers and had rushed out of house with them to read them to the men.

"Thar's no need of any papers 'bout this here capitulation or nothin' else," growled one of the men. "All we've got tew do is jest tew take these here prisoners tew Captain Fremont, an' I reckon, we don't need no papers tew do that."

Nearly all the men supported this view of the matter; and, after much loud talking, it was finally decided to send four of the most important prisoners, General Vallejo, his brother Captain Don Salvador Vallejo, his brother-in-law Jacob P. Leese and Lieutenant-Colonel Victor Purdon, to Fremont.

General Vallejo, although chagrined at the turn affairs had taken, for he had hoped to secure his personal freedom through the articles of capitulation, was still the courteous and hospitable prisoner-host. He sent for his *caballada* (herd of saddle-

broken horses), and offered his captors fresh horses, with which to mount the men who were to guard the prisoners on their way to Fremont's camp. The offer was accepted, but with the understanding that General Vallejo was to be remunerated as soon as the new government should become established.

Just before the start back to the camp of Fremont with the prisoners was made, Noel Conroyal and Mr. Randolph called the two boys to them.

"Mr. Randolph and I think it would be a good idea," Conroyal said, as the boys hurried up, "to leave someone here, who, if anything important happens, can ride at once to Fremont; and we have concluded that you two boys are the ones to leave."

"Good!" broke in Miguel Vallejo. "They can stay with me. I am sure mother will be glad to have them."

"Thank you, Miguel," and Mr. Conroyal laid a hand affectionately on the boy's shoulder. "Yes, they can stay with you, if your folks are willing. Now," and he again turned to Thure and Bud, "Mr. Ide will be left in command of the Americans who remain to hold Sonoma. We have already spoken with him; and, if anything happens which he thinks Fremont should know, he will send you boys at once with a message to him. So you will constantly hold yourselves in readiness to ride at any moment. This means that you must keep yourselves all the time where Ide can find you quickly

and do no skylarking about the country. Now, what do you boys say? Are you willing?"

"Yes," answered both boys in one breath; and their sparkling eyes and flushed faces spoke even more eloquently of their willingness than did their ready response.

Both men smiled and each glanced at the other a little proudly.

"Then Ide can depend on you. But now we must say good-by; for I see the men are mounting. Take good care of yourselves," and the two men hurried away to join the convoy, who, with the four prisoners in their midst, were already mounted and ready to start on their way back to the camp of Fremont.

"Come, let us go and tell mother that you are to be my company," urged Miguel rejoicingly, when, at last, the convoy and their prisoners had disappeared from sight behind a low hill. "She will be very glad to make you welcome in our home."

The father of Miguel Vallejo was a cousin of General Vallejo and made his home in one of the many apartments of the General's large house in Sonoma, one of the largest and most pretentious houses then in California; and thither the three boys now hurried, to pay their respects to Miguel's mother.

They found Mrs. Vallejo very much excited over the happenings of the morning and more than a

little indignant over the rough manners of the Americanos, who had so rudely destroyed the peacefulness of their quiet little town; but she welcomed the two boys warmly and bade Miguel see that they had everything to make their stay with them comfortable and pleasant.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BEAR FLAG

EIGHTEEN men were left with Ide to hold Sonoma; but, in a few days, when the capture of the town became known throughout the surrounding country, this number was increased to some fifty men, by the hurrying hither of the Americans in the vicinity. All now felt that the war between the Mexican authorities and the Americans in California had actually begun; and, whether or not they approved of the manner of its beginning, all the Americans knew that they must now stand together, or be destroyed, or, at the least, driven from the country. Hence, at the news of the capture of Sonoma, every American man, who could do so, shouldered his rifle and started with his family, if he had one, for the nearest body of armed Americans.

During these few days Thure and Bud were constantly on the watch for something to happen, which would send them post-haste to Fremont. Every morning and every night they reported to Captain Ide, as he was now called, and, during the day, they, in company with young Vallejo, spent most of their time in the plaza talking with the Americans, where

they could be quickly summoned, should there be sudden need of their services; but for two or three days nothing occurred that would justify a special message to Fremont. Then one morning, when they entered the plaza, they saw Ide standing on a box surrounded by a crowd of Americans and Mexicans, evidently making some sort of an appeal to them, judging by his emphatic gestures and loud voice.

"Hurry! Ide is making a speech," and Thure started on the run for the crowd, followed by Bud and Miguel.

In a minute more the three boys were pushing their way through the crowd and they did not pause until they had reached a spot near the speaker.

Ide was in the midst of an impassionate appeal to the Americans and the friendly Californians there present, in behalf of a proclamation setting forth the purposes for which the Americans had gathered and the principles in support of which they had taken up arms, which, it appears, he had been busy preparing during the past two days, and which he wished them to adopt as their Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Independence of the new Republic of California that was about to be established. The proclamation itself was tacked on the old Mexican flagstaff in the center of the plaza, where all could read.

Ide was eloquent; and the men, partly in a burst of enthusiastic approval and partly in good-natured

acquiescence, authorized the adoption and promulgation of the declaration, amid a great deal of cheering and a little laughing and jesting, for there were some who looked upon this idea of Ide's of a new Republic of California as a joke.

"Now, we shore want a flag!" yelled one of the men.

"You are right," responded Ide. "We must have a flag. Now, what shall the device on the flag be?"

"A grizzly b'ar, th' monarch of these here mountains an' plains," declared a huge hunter. "He never gives th' road tew man or beast, never is scart by numbers and fights till he drops dead. I reckon that is 'bout th' kind of a device we want on this here flag of our Republic. It will tell the Mexies plain what kind of a tackle they're up against."

A great shout of approval greeted this suggestion; and a man by the name of William L. Todd, who had a little skill with the brush, seized upon a piece of brown cotton cloth a couple of yards or so in length, and with a pot of old red or brown paint and an old brush painted thereon a rude likeness of a grizzly bear. Then this piece of cloth was raised to the top of the old Mexican flagstaff, some seventy feet high; and the emblem of the new Republic was unfurled to the breeze amid the cheers and volleyed rifle shots of the Americans.

"Now, that's not a bad flag for the Republic of

California," Thure declared a little later, as the three boys stood admiring the result of Todd's artistic skill. "I mean that grizzly bear emblem; and, if it will inspire its followers to fight like grizzlies, why they can lick the whole world. A grizzly don't even know when he is licked, and is never more dangerous than when he is mortally wounded. But, I wonder what Fremont will think of this new Republic idea of Ide's," and his face clouded a little.

"I don't know what Fremont will think, but I know what I think," Bud declared emphatically. "I don't like this ugly-looking bear flag half as well as I do the beautiful stars and stripes; and I do not want California to become a Republic by itself. I want it to become a part of the great United States."

"Good!" agreed Thure; and "Good!" echoed Miguel Vallejo, who was almost as rabid an American as were the boys themselves.

"Señors," and an old Mexican, who had been staring at the flag for the last five minutes, now turned to the boys, a puzzled look on his wrinkled face. "Why have the mad Americanos a pig on a piece of cloth painted and hung it high in the air? Is it that they would make of the pig their flag?"

The faces of the boys flushed and they were about to retort angrily, when another look at the flag caused them to burst into hearty laughs.

"Well, I'll be teetotally flopdoodled, if it don't look more like a fat pig than it does like a bear!"

Thure exclaimed, his eyes on the crude figure on the flag. "But it won't do to have the Mexicans calling it the pig flag," and his face sobered and he turned to the Mexican. "Señor," he said, "your eyes are old and you do not see clearly. That is not a pig you see painted on that flag, but a bear—a grizzly bear; and it means that those who raised it will be as brave and as strong as the grizzly in defending their rights and liberties against the tyranny of Mexico."

"Bravo, my young friend of Liberty!" and Ide, who had approached unnoticed by the boys in time to hear Thure's last words, placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You have correctly interpreted the symbol of the bear. We will defend our liberties and our rights, if we must, with all the grizzly's strength and courage and tenacity, guided by human intelligence and favored, we trust, by Divine Providence. But, I came to tell you to prepare at once to ride to Captain Fremont. He must know that the new Republic of California has been established, that its flag floats in the breeze and that we at Sonoma are about to organize the new government. You will carry him a copy of my proclamation; and you will tell him what you have this day seen and heard." Ide's eyes kindled. At the moment, he saw himself the father of a new Republic, that would be builded into greatness in that beautiful land on the shores of the great Pacific; and the dream was a pleasant and a glorious one.

"We will be ready to start in half an hour," Thure answered, his own eyes lighting.

"Good. When you are mounted, report to me for your message and instructions," and Ide strode swiftly away, deep in his thoughts of his new Republic.

Thure and Bud, accompanied by Miguel, hurried to the corral where their horses were kept; and, in less than the half hour, pulled up their horses in front of the house where Ide had established his headquarters. Captain Ide, a sealed packet of papers in his hand, stood in the door awaiting them.

"Ride with all despatch," he said, as he handed the packet of papers to Thure; "and keep a sharp lookout for Mexican soldiers."

"Yes, sir," and Thure placed the packet in the bosom of his buckskin shirt. "We will get to Fremont's camp as quickly as our horses' legs will take us there. Have we everything now?"

"Yes. A safe and a quick ride to you. Good-by," and, with a wave of his hand, Ide hurried into the house.

The two boys, they had already said their farewells to Miguel and his mother, at once struck spurs into their horses and galloped out of Sonoma. The day was still young; and, by riding hard, they hoped to reach the camp of Fremont late in the afternoon of the next day. This would mean that they would have to spend a night alone out in the wilds; but, to boys as hardy and as accustomed to

roughing it as were Thure and Bud, this would be no hardship and have no terrors. Indeed, they rather liked the responsibility of traveling alone. It made them feel more grown-up, more like men. Besides, each of the lads carried his rifle and his hunting-knife, and there were a couple of pistols in the holster of each saddle, and their horses were both remarkably fleet-footed; so, why should they fear? The danger they could not overcome with rifles and knives and pistols, they could flee from on the backs of their horses.

All that day they rode steadily on their way; and, when night came, it found them entering a secluded valley in the midst of surrounding hills, with a little grove of trees growing near its center and a small stream of water flowing within a few rods of the grove.

"I think we had better camp here," Thure said, as the two boys pulled up their tired horses to glance over the quiet scene. "That grove will furnish a good hiding-place for ourselves and horses, and we will be near plenty of wood and water."

"Yes," agreed Bud, "I think it is time we went into camp; and this looks like a good place. We can build a little fire out of dry wood, so that there won't be any smoke, in there among the trees, where it will be completely hidden from anyone happening to pass along, although I do not think there is much danger. There doesn't seem to be

a human being in all the Valley. At least I haven't seen a sign of one, Indian, Mexican or American, since leaving Sonoma. Have you?"

"No," answered Thure; "but we had better take no chances. General Castro must have heard of the capture of Sonoma before this and has probably sent out small scouting parties to be on the lookout for Americans. I wouldn't like to fall into the hands of one of these parties; for, I reckon, they'll be in pretty ugly tempers and there is no telling what they might do to a fellow. Some of them Mexican soldiers, you know, were murderers and thieves down in Mexico; and, instead of putting them in prison where they belong, the Mexican government has made soldiers out of them and sent them up here to keep us Americans in order," and Thure's face flushed angrily. "I don't wonder that even the native Californians are ready to rebel against such a government."

"Yes," assented Bud. "Dad says that half of the soldiers that Mexico sends up here would be hanged, if they got their rights; and that some of the officers are not much better. Now," and his eyes glanced swiftly around, "I am going to climb to the top of that tall tree and see if there is anything that looks suspicious around," and he pointed to a large tree that grew a dozen rods away. "I reckon I can see all over the valley from its top. Just hold my horse. 'Twon't take but a minute or two," and, jumping off his horse, he handed the

reins to Thure and, running to the tree, climbed swiftly to its top and carefully examined the little valley.

"Not a sign of a human being anywhere in sight," he said, as he climbed down the tree and again mounted his horse; "and I could see nearly every inch of ground in the valley, except that hidden by the trees. There is a herd of elks just beyond the trees, and that is a sure sign that there is nothing dangerous to us hidden in the grove. Come on, and maybe we can get one of the elks for supper. The wind is right," and he headed his horse toward the little grove.

When they reached the grove, both boys dismounted and securely tied their horses. The animals were too nearly worn-out to be used in hunting the elks. Then they made their way cautiously through the little woods toward the spot where Bud had seen the elks, hoping to find one of the animals within rifle-shot of the grove. Along the outer edge of the grove was a thicket of underbrush that effectually concealed their movements; and, carefully working their way through this, they at last came within sight of their quarry.

There were half a hundred or more elks scattered about over the valley in front of them; and one, a fat little buck that could not have been over a year old, stood within easy rifle-range.

"He's our meat," whispered Thure, pointing toward the young buck. "You can have the first shot,

Bud, because you saw them first. I'll stand ready to shoot, if you don't get him."

"All right," and Bud dropped on one knee and, throwing his rifle to his shoulder, took careful aim and fired.

The young elk fell almost in his tracks, shot through the base of his skull, an exceedingly difficult shot to make, but sudden death, if hit.

"I see," laughed Thure, when he saw where the ball had struck, "that you did not intend to give me a chance."

"I wanted just to see if I could hit him there," and Bud smiled. "I knew that you would get him, if I missed."

The two boys now cut the choicest portions of meat from the carcass and, returning to their horses, sought a place for their camp. This they found near the center of the grove, where there was a little natural opening concealed by the underbrush and trees and with sufficient grass growing in it to feed their horses. Here they built a little fire, being very careful to use only dry wood, so that there would be no smoke that would show above the treetops; and then, cutting sticks of green wood about three feet long, they sharpened both ends and, thrusting one end through a chunk of the elk meat, they pushed the other end into the ground near the fire and at such a slant that the meat would be just the right distance from the coals to broil nicely. This done they filled a small coffee pot with water, poured

a little coffee into it and hung it over the fire to boil from the end of a third and longer stick, driven firmly into the ground at the right angle to keep the pot at the proper distance from the fire. When the coffee had boiled sufficiently and the meat was done to a turn, they cut a few slices from the loaf of bread they had brought with them; and their simple but wholesome meal was ready.

"Do you think we had better keep guard?" Bud asked, as they sat near the genial glow of the camp-fire after they had eaten their supper. "We are so completely hidden in these woods that I don't believe there is the least danger of any one finding us, unless they search the woods and nobody is going to do that at night."

"I don't suppose there is any danger," Thure answered; "but still I think one of us had better keep guard while the other sleeps. One can never tell what will happen in the wilderness; and Kit Carson says it is always better to be overcautious and keep your scalp on your head than it is to be overconfident and to run the risk of losing it. You know the only night we had no guard, when I was with Fremont, was the night the Klamaths attacked us and killed three of our men; and even Kit Carson did not think there would be any danger that night. I'll stand guard the first half of the night."

"All right," Bud acquiesced. "The only thing I am afraid of is Mexicans; and I don't believe there is one of them within ten miles of us; still, of course,

it is better to be on the safe side. But, isn't this great?" and his eyes glanced around the picturesque little encampment. "I do not wonder that hunters and trappers, after they have spent a year or so out in the wilderness, can never be content to live cooped up inside of four stiff walls to shut out the air and a roof to hide that," and he pointed above his head, where now the stars looked down through the clear air in all the glorious splendors of God's own canopy.

"Yes, it is great," Thure agreed reverently. "And, somehow, when I stand in the midst of the silence and the darkness and the mystery of the wilderness at night, with all those wonderful lights shining down from above, I always feel as if—as if I were in a great church built by God's own hands, as if I ought to take off my hat and fall on my knees."

"That's it! That is just the way I feel to-night!" Bud declared. "I think I'll be a trapper and hunter, like Kit Carson, when I grow up."

For an hour the two boys sat close together by the fire, talking in low tones; and then Bud arose to prepare his bed for the night. First he found a smooth spot of ground, free from all roots and stones and where the light of the camp-fire did not shine on it, so that no enemy could find him by its light. Then, with his hunting-knife, he slightly hollowed out the ground where his hips would fall, placed his saddle down on the ground for a pillow,

rolled himself and rifle up in his heavy blanket and lay down to sleep as warmly and as comfortably as you boys do in your soft beds.

Thure, also, stepped outside of the circle of light made by the camp-fire and took up his station in the deep shadows of the overhanging branches of a tree, where he could keep his eyes on the two horses and on the form of Bud, which, in the darkness, looked more like a short piece of a log than it did like the body of a human being.

An hour—two hours—three hours passed. He had not heard a suspicious sound nor seen a suspicious movement; and now, tired by his long day's ride, he began to get very, very sleepy. He leaned up against the trunk of the tree, his head nodded, fell forward on his chest, remained there a few moments and then was straightened up with a startled jerk. A few minutes later and his head was nodding again and, presently, it again fell forward on his chest.

Almost at the same moment several dark forms emerged from the black shadows of the surrounding trees, and crept silently toward the sleeping sentinel under the tree and the sleeping boy rolled up in his blanket. When within a few feet of Thure, a dry twig snapped under the feet of one of the shadowy forms approaching him. Instantly all stood motionless, breathless; but Thure did not lift his head, did not move; and the cautious advance was again begun. Now, a couple of the shadowy forms

crouch above Bud, a couple stand within hand-reach of Thure; and still both boys sleep, ignorant of their peril.

Suddenly, a shrill whistle breaks the silence of the night; and, at the instant of its sound, the crouching forms hurl themselves upon Bud, pinioning him in his own blanket, the two standing near Thure, with a quick jump, throw a blanket over his head and shoulders; and, in that moment, both boys are helpless and at the mercy of their captors.

CHAPTER XX

PADILLA

WHEN the blankets were removed from the heads of Thure and Bud and they could look around and note what had happened, they found themselves standing by the side of their own camp-fire, which had been replenished and was now burning brightly, with half a dozen dark-skinned villainous-looking faces, leering and grinning triumphantly at them above a half circle of greasy-looking bodies clothed in the worn and dirty uniforms of Mexican soldiers. They were not bound, but all their weapons had been taken from them, and their captors stood with rifles in their hands and knives and pistols in their belts. It would be impossible to tell which look, the look of disgust at their being so easily captured by the Mexicans or that of dread at what might be in store for them, showed most on the faces of the two boys as they turned and looked into each other's eyes.

"Well, they've got us," Bud remarked laconically, his white lips forming a sickly smile.

"And without a shot fired or a blow struck. They found me asleep." Even the fear in Thure's heart could not keep down his self-disgust.

"So they did me," Bud added, with a grin. "But, pluck up. It is better this way, than it would have been if we had got killed or had killed some of them, as might have happened had you been awake. Now, they can't have very much of a grudge against us; and they would have got us anyway."

But, good as was this logic, it was of little comfort to Thure. He had been captured while sleeping at his post; and all the logic in the world could not wash the shame of the disgrace away.

Their captors, after leering and grinning at them for a minute or two, tightly tied their hands behind their backs, threw them roughly up on the backs of their own horses, which they had saddled and bridled, and then, leading the horses, conducted them to where their own horses were tied in the edge of the grove. All then mounted and started off across the valley, toward the mountains that loomed shadow-like in the distance against the clear starlit skies.

So far not one of their captors had spoken a word to the two boys, but they had jabbered away in Spanish among themselves at a great rate. Bud could not understand a word they said; but Thure, who had lived for many years in New Orleans where Spanish, at that time, was almost as much used as English, spoke and understood the Spanish language nearly as well as he did the English, and he, of course, could understand every word the Mexican soldiers said.

"They are taking us to their chief," he said in a low voice to Bud, as they rode along, "who is with more men somewhere in the mountains. They heard your rifle shot when you killed the elk, and saw us enter the woods; and then, when it became dark, they crept up and watched us until you went to bed and I fell asleep at my post—you know the rest," he added ruefully. "I can't make out just who they are, but I am sure one of them is a bad Mexican known as Four-fingered Jack, so I think we have fallen into hard hands. I—"

But here one of the Mexicans struck Thure across his mouth with the flat of his hand, which was Mexican for "Shut up! No more talk"; and brought the conversation to an abrupt close.

At the end of two hours' steady riding they entered a maze of rocky gullies, narrow ravines and deep canyons, that seemed, as far as the boys could see in the darkness, to run in every direction; and, finally, after passing through a deep and narrow canyon, they came to a quiet little valley of only a few acres in extent. At the entrance to this valley they were challenged and passed by a sentry and near its center glowed the coals of a large camp-fire, around which lay the sleeping forms of a number of men.

Four-fingered Jack, who appeared to be the leader of the little band of Mexicans who had captured the boys, now gave a loud hallo; and the sleeping men at once sprang to their feet; and, in a couple of min-

utes more, the boys found themselves in the midst of the Mexican chief's mountain camp. There were apparently—in the confusion and the darkness the boys could not count very accurately—a couple of dozen men, all wearing the uniforms of Mexican soldiers. These crowded curiously around the boys, while Four-fingered Jack told the story of their capture to the officer in command, who stood a little apart near the camp-fire.

Presently Four-fingered Jack turned and gave a command in Mexican. Instantly two of the men seized hold of each of the boys and, pulling them roughly from their horses, dragged them to where the leader stood by the camp-fire.

Fresh wood had been thrown on the fire and it was now blazing brightly.

The officer, his back had been to the boys, turned suddenly on the approach of the two lads and faced them.

"Padilla!" gasped Thure, his face going white.

The officer started, bent forward and peered sharply into Thure's face and then straightened up, his black eyes glowing with satisfaction and vindictive hatred.

"Padilla, yes," he said. "I am Padilla; and you the son of Conroyal, who struck me with his big fist, who whipped me with his whip, like I was a dog. Now," and his thin lips tightened across his teeth until they showed, like the teeth of a snarling dog, "there is war between the Americanos and the

Mexicans; and you are in my power, and I can do with you as I will—whip—shoot—hang—torture—make slave—as I will. Padilla never forgets, never forgives. Now, I sleep and dream how I your father make suffer through you. In the morning I say more. See that they not escape. If they get away, the guard I will shoot,” and, with a last taunting vindictive look into the face of Thure, Padilla turned again to his blanket.

A short distance from the camp-fire grew a number of small trees. Thure and Bud were now taken to these trees; and each lad was set down with his back to the trunk of a tree and then his arms were pulled backward around the trunk and his hands securely tied behind the tree. Then a stake was driven firmly into the ground between their feet and each ankle tied to it. The trees to which the boys were thus fastened were about six feet apart.

“Say,” Bud remarked, when this interesting performance was completed, “come to think about it, I have concluded that I will not escape to-night. So I am going to lay my head back against my downy tree trunk and see if I can’t get some sleep; and you’d better do the same, Thure.”

“Yes,” growled Thure wrathfully, “I reckon that is all we can do, if we can do that. Even Kit Carson couldn’t escape tied up the way we are. But, what do you suppose Padilla will do with us? He—he looked as if he might do anything,” and Thure shuddered. “And, worst of all, father or Uncle

Frank or Rex and Dill or Ham or any of our friends won't even know that we've been captured. If dad knew, he'd make things hot for Padilla; but it may be days before any of them find out that the Mexicans have got us."

"Padilla won't dare do us any real hurt. He must treat us as prisoners of war. If he does, he knows that every American in California will be after him."

"Won't he?" and Thure shook his head gloomily. "You don't know Padilla. Besides there is war now; and there is always Mexico for him to flee to. I wish I could get free," and he gave a violent but vain tug at the strong cords that bound his hands behind the tree.

At this moment a Mexican approached each boy, with a bunch of dirty rags in his hand; and signified that if he did not stop talking, he would stuff the rags into his mouth.

The boys stopped; and the remainder of the night was passed, sitting in silence with their backs to the trees. Both boys slept a little at irregular intervals, their tired heads resting on their chests; but never were two boys gladder to see the dawn of morning than they were.

Not until the sun shone down into the little cup-like valley did the Mexicans stir themselves. Then Padilla awoke, jumped to his feet, glanced swiftly in the direction of the two boys and proceeded to awake his followers by passing quickly from one to

another and giving each a gentle kick as he passed. He did not come near Thure and Bud until he had eaten his breakfast. Then he swaggered up in front of them and stopped.

"Now we talk more," he said, smiling down into Thure's face, "talk about what I do with you. I think maybe hang, good; but, no, that too short. Maybe," and his eyes glinted cruelly, "torture better. Last longer. Yes, I think torture better. Now, how torture?" and he paused, as if to consider just what form of torture would suit their particular case best.

"Oh, any old way you please!" Thure broke in scornfully. "We are not scared of your torture—only just remember that Dad and Frank Holt and Hammer Jones and Kit Carson and a lot of angry Americans are probably hot on your trail even now; and they will get you before night sure; and, if they find that you have harmed a hair of our heads, what they did to you in the Devil's Trail will be as—"

"Pig! I'll show you how I fear that big dad," and Padilla, his face white with wrath, turned to give an order, doubtless to begin the torture, when a horseman galloped into the valley, and, pulling up his horse in front of Padilla, saluted and handed him a paper.

"From General Castro," he said in Spanish.

Padilla, with a curse, took the paper and quickly read it. Then, with more curses, he turned to his men and ordered them to saddle up at once.

"Soon we talk more," he scowled at Thure, and, turning on his heel, hurried away to get ready for instant departure.

Whatever General Castro's orders were they must have been imperative; for seldom had Thure and Bud seen Mexicans move as lively as these did for the next few minutes, saddling and bridling their horses, packing their camp equipage and getting everything ready for the start. In fifteen minutes every man was mounted, including Thure and Bud, who were given two scrubby-looking horses to ride in place of their own splendid animals and told, that, if they attempted to escape, they would be shot on the spot. But this time their hands were not bound; and both lads were very thankful for this.

There was no delay in getting off. Padilla at once gave the order; and they rode swiftly out of the little valley, through canyons and gullies and deep ravines, until, at last, they came out into the open Valley of the Sacramento. Here they paused and, after a short consultation, Padilla at the head of all but six men, who were left to guard Thure and Bud, rode off swiftly to the southward.

"Now, I wonder what is up?" and Bud's eyes followed the departing Mexicans anxiously.

"I think from what I overheard," Thure replied, "that they are after some Americans that they have got wind of."

"Well, I hope they don't get them," Bud declared emphatically.

"So do I; and I guess from what I heard that Castro's express was to let Padilla know of the capture of Sonoma and to order him to join the forces of Captain de la Torre. He'll be more ugly than ever now."

"Padilla say we must tie your hands behind your back," and a couple of the men, who had been left in charge of the lads, approached Thure and Bud and again tightly bound their hands together behind their backs. "He also say you must no talk, or—" and the speaker made a suggestive gesture toward a dirty bunch of rags tied to the pommel of his saddle, one glimpse of which was sufficient to cure both boys of all desire for further talking.

The journey was now resumed, two of the men riding in front of the boys, two behind them and one on each side. Evidently they did not intend to take any chances with the Americanos, even if they were only boys.

CHAPTER XXI

KILLING OF COWIE AND FOWLER

ALL day long their captors jogged steadily on; and, when night came, it found them in a secluded little valley, shut in on all sides by low-lying hills. Here the men halted and at once prepared to go into camp.

Thure and Bud dismounted stiffly. Their wrists, where they were bound together by the cords, were very much swollen and pained them so severely that they begged the Mexicans to untie them and, at last, prevailed upon them to do so.

"If dad ever gets hold of Padilla again, I hope he won't let him off with just a licking." Thure was rubbing his aching wrists and spoke vehemently. "He ought to be hanged and quartered and burned and shot and his head cut off."

"Is that all?" and Bud smiled, in spite of his own aches. "I thought from your looks that you were going to wish that something real dreadful would happen to him. Now," and he lowered his voice to a whisper, so that the guard, who stood leaning on his rifle not a dozen feet away, could not hear him, "we must try to escape to-night, while there are so few men to guard us."

"Well, I reckon we'll have to do it pretty sudden then," Thure answered dejectedly, pointing over Bud's shoulder; "for there comes Padilla and his gang of cut-throats, unless my eyes fool me."

Bud wheeled quickly around and glared wrathfully at the body of horsemen that had just ridden in sight over the top of one of the low hills.

"You are right," he declared disgustedly. "And now we will be tied up so tight that we will be in luck if we can wink an eyelid—Look! Look there!" he exclaimed excitedly a moment later. "Just behind Padilla! They have got two prisoners! Who can they be?"

"I know one of them—yes, both of them!" and Thure trembled with excitement. "It is Mr. Cowie and Mr. Fowler. They live near Sonoma."

"Well, we'll have company in our misery anyway; and," Bud lowered his voice, "four heads ought to be better than two in planning an escape, especially when the added two are on grown-up shoulders." Bud always saw the brightest side of anything.

Evidently Padilla and his men had traveled far and were very tired. At least all of them were in an exceedingly ugly humor and all were greatly excited. The moment they reached the camp they flung themselves off their horses, tied the two prisoners to trees and stationed a guard over them. Then all, except the ones guarding the prisoners, gathered about Padilla in an excited gesticulating group. Padilla harangued them, with many loud

words and emphatic gestures; but they were too far away for Thure to get any clear idea of what he was saying. He frequently caught the words "Americans" and "Sonoma" and "Captain Fremont"; and judged from these that he was telling them of the revolt of the Americans at Sonoma and how Captain Fremont and the United States was probably back of it all. The speech was greeted with yells of approval and cries of "Down with the Americans!" "Drive them out of California, off the ground of Mexico!" and many angry looks and gestures in the direction of the two boys and of Cowie and Fowler.

"What is all the excitement about?" and Bud turned an anxious face to Thure. "Sounds like a convention of coyotes."

Thure gave him all the light he could on the matter.

"Begins to look a little squally for us," he ended apprehensively. "I wish we could speak with Cowie and Fowler."

But his wish was vain. They were not allowed to go near the two men or to speak a word to them.

After Padilla's harangue was completed, the men gathered in little excited groups; and, for half an hour or more, appeared to be talking things over among themselves. Then they became more quiet and set about their neglected camp duties.

Padilla himself, after a scowling glance in the direction of Thure and Bud, which was quickly fol-

lowed by an order to tie them to trees, as they had been tied the night before, threw himself down on his blanket, like a man completely worn-out.

Both boys breathed easier at sight of this action of Padilla.

"Thank goodness, we are to be spared a closer view of his ugly face, for a little while at least," Thure breathed fervently. "My, but wouldn't I like to punch him one in the nose! The brute! We were safe enough without being tied up in this cruel manner. But, just wait till dad and Uncle Frank and Rex and Dill and Hammer Jones get hold of him!"

"Stop that pig's grunting!" and Padilla half arose from his blanket and glowered at Thure. "If he open mouth again, stuff full of old rags," and he sank back on his blanket.

Of course that ended all talk between the two boys for the night.

When the Mexicans had eaten all they wished themselves, they untied the prisoners and gave them each a chunk of meat and a couple of dry cakes; and then, after they had eaten, retied them to the trees and, placing a guard over them and the camp, rolled themselves up in their blankets and were soon sleeping the sleep of tired men.

The next morning Thure and Bud were so stiff and sore that they could hardly move; and, judging from their looks and acts, their fellow prisoners were in the same unpleasant condition. The boys

were still kept separate from the two men; but all were untied and allowed to rub and stretch their sorely abused limbs.

Padilla, as soon as a hurriedly prepared breakfast had been eaten, gave the order to saddle up and soon the whole body was in motion, the prisoners all riding together near the center of the company.

Now, for the first time, the boys had a chance to talk with Cowie and Fowler; and learned that they had been captured while on their way from Sonoma to Bodega. They said that there was a report that General Castro was hurrying northward at the head of a large army of Mexican soldiers; and that, doubtless, Padilla had been ordered to rush southward as fast as he could with what soldiers he had with him to meet this army.

"But, if Captain Fremont will only take command of the Americans," Cowie declared, "so that all can have confidence in their leader, there are not enough Mexican soldiers in all California to drive us out; and those who ought to know say, that that is just what Fremont will do when the proper time comes. But, how did you boys happen to fall into the hands of Padilla? Everybody at Sonoma thinks that you are in the camp of Fremont by now."

With a face that flushed with shame, but without sparing himself, Thure told the tale of their capture.

"Well, I don't see how it would have helped matters, if you had kept awake," Cowie affirmed.

"They would have got you anyway, dead or alive; and alive is always better than dead."

"But, now that they have got us, what do you suppose they will do with us?" Bud asked apprehensively. "Padilla is a natural brute and he has a grudge against Thure, and his soldiers all look as if they were escaped convicts and this trouble at Sonoma will make them ugly."

"I don't know," answered Cowie, a troubled look in his eyes. "If this was a regular detachment of Mexican soldiers under a decent officer, I would have no fears; but, with this brute Padilla in command of a lot of men who come nearer to being cut-throats than they do to being Mexican soldiers, although they are wearing the uniform, heaven only knows what they will do. We must try to escape to-night, if possible."

"Sure," and Thure spoke with wrathful scorn, "we'll escape to-night. All that we will have to do will be just to twist our mouths around to the back-side of our necks and gnaw the trees down to which we will be tied, as sure as that brute, Padilla, is alive," and he scowled fiercely in the direction of that unworthy's back, which could be seen a couple of rods in advance; and, as if in answer to his look, Padilla turned in his saddle and glared back at him. Then he turned and spoke angrily to a subordinate officer riding by his side.

The officer at once rode back to where the prison-

ers were and ordered two men to ride by the side of each prisoner and to see that there was no more talking.

"If the prisoners refuse to obey, gag them," he said, as he galloped ahead to his place by the side of Padilla.

The rest of the journey that day was made in silence, so far as Thure and Bud and their fellow prisoners were concerned.

That night something seemed to have gone wrong with Padilla, for he was in a particularly bad humor when they halted to go into camp. He swore at his men, knocked Cowie down with the flat of his sword, because the American called him a brute with a heart blacker than his face, and stormed about like an insane man or a melodramatic stage hero, heaping all kinds of verbal abuse upon all Americans, in which he was heartily joined by his men.

This was more than the American manhood of Cowie and Fowler could stand; and they answered them back with taunts even more bitter and biting than they received, because of the truth back of them; and, almost before the horrified boys could comprehend what was going on, the inflamed passions of the Mexicans broke through all restraints. Then began a scene of horror too terrible for words to describe or the mind to picture. The two unfortunate men, still anathematizing and defying their tormentors, were tied to trees and tor-

tured to death, in a manner that would have made even the reddest Indian turn away in disgust.

Thure and Bud, long before this horrible butchery came to an end, were knocked down and into unconsciousness by the hand of Padilla himself; and thus were mercifully spared the witnessing of the most horrible scenes of the torture. When consciousness came back to them, the two men were dead; and they themselves were tied to trees, with Padilla standing gloatingly in front of them.

"Now, your turn," he said, shaking his fist in Thure's face. "Now, I get revenge for every blow, every whip-lash your father hit me. Look there," and he pointed to the mutilated bodies of Cowie and Fowler, which still hung to the trees. "Soon you be like them; but not until you suffer. Ah-h-h, not until you suffer."

"Go ahead, you brute," and Thure's eyes flashed out of his white face. "You dirty, sneaking coward! You are not fit to wear a Digger Indian's greasy blanket. Go ahead; but remember you are a dead man. There is not an American in California who won't kill you on sight after this."

Padilla could control himself no longer.

"Pig!" he yelled, and raised his arm, a knife already stained with blood clenched in his fingers; but, before the blow could fall, a huge hand gripped the upraised wrist and held it as if it were in a vise.

Padilla, with a yell of rage, whirled about and

looked into the angry eyes of Four-fingered Jack.

"No—no!" and Four-fingered Jack shook his head vehemently. "You shall not hurt the boys. We fight men, not boys." Even his brutal nature had revolted.

For a minute it seemed as if Padilla would turn his wrath upon Four-fingered Jack; and he would, doubtless, have done so, if he had not caught the muttered threats and angry expostulations of the men, who had now crowded up close around him and Four-fingered Jack, and glanced quickly into their faces. What he saw there told him that, hardened villains as most of them doubtless were, they would not stand quietly by and see the boys killed, much less aid in the killing. They could butcher men; but not boys.

"No—no; you shall not hurt the boys," repeated Four-fingered Jack, his sullen eyes glowing. "You shall promise not to hurt the boys; or we cut their bonds and set them free. Is it not so, men?"

"Yes! Yes!" a dozen shouted back. "We are not butchers of boys, even if they are Americanos."

"You promise?" Four-fingered Jack still held Padilla's wrist.

Padilla glared from the face of Four-fingered Jack to the face of Thure, with something of the look of a hyena being driven from his prey; and, seeing that it would be useless to resist, gave a sullen assent.

Four-fingered Jack dropped his wrist; and

Padilla, with an angry oath, whirled about and strode sullenly away. For the time being, he had been robbed of his revenge; but, the look on his face, as he turned away, if it said anything, said that it was only for the time being.

"If you will untie my hands, I'll shake hands with you," Thure said, his voice trembling just a little; for the ordeal through which he had just passed had been a terrible one for nerves as young as his to withstand.

Four-fingered Jack grinned; and, after a few minutes' consultation with the men, stepped forward and unfastened both boys from the trees.

Thure promptly kept his word and gripped the huge hand that had stayed the murderous knife.

"I'll tell dad and the rest that you saved our lives," he said, as he shook the hand; "and, I reckon, that'll help you some, when they get hold of Padilla and his men."

CHAPTER XXII

THE LITTLE GROVE OF BRUSHWOOD

FOR the first night since their capture, Thure and Bud were not bound to trees that night; but, to the amusement of the men and to their own chagrin, each lad was rolled up in a blanket and then a lasso was tightly wound around the blanket and securely tied. This prevented their escaping as effectually as did the tree-tying and was a great deal more comfortable way of sleeping, although it still left much in the way of ease and comfort to be desired.

"Say, but you do look like an Egyptian mummy," and Bud grinned at Thure, who lay five or six feet from him. "Stop your frowning. That spoils the effect. Mummies don't frown. Close your eyes. There, old Pharaoh himself couldn't look more natural. One would really think you were alive."

"Well, if I don't make a handsomer mummy than you do," Thure returned, "they'll never put me in a glass case in a museum for folks to look at. I never knew you were so homely before," and the grin that followed the words took away their sting.

Neither boy spoke a word of Cowie or Fowler. They could not. And this little attempt at pleas-

antry was but an effort to drive the horrible scene from their thoughts. Even the brutal Mexican soldiers seemed to be strangely affected. They stole silently about the camp; or, when they did speak, they spoke in low voices, and cast apprehensive glances out into the surrounding darkness, as if they were fearful that some dreadful thing might be walking there.

Padilla did not come near the boys; but retired early and sullenly to his blanket, where, let us hope, he passed a miserable phantom-haunted night.

The next morning everybody awoke early; and, after eating a hurriedly prepared breakfast, Padilla and his soldiers and their prisoners made all possible haste to get away from that accursed spot, the superstitious Mexicans casting apprehensive glances behind them, even in the clear light of the early morning, as they rode out of the little valley where the horrible scenes had been enacted.

Padilla, however, had recovered his usual cynical cheerfulness; and, just before mounting, he had walked up to the two boys.

"Sometime soon we talk again," he had said, his evil eyes glinting and his thin lips drawing over his white teeth in a cur smile, "when only you and I near to listen. Then," and his long fingers had clenched themselves suggestively, "I make talk much interesting. Now we go join more Mexican soldiers, who soon drive all Americanos out of California. Not one living Americano shall we leave

in California," and, with this boast, he had hurried away to mount his horse.

Neither boy had answered him a word. They had only looked at him and pointed to the trees, where the hideous things that yesterday had been two living, breathing men, still hung; and, even the face of Padilla had whitened, as he had hurried from them.

That night they reached the Santa Rosa Plains, where they were joined by Captain Joaquin de la Torre, with seventy armed Mexican soldiers. For a day or two the boys were kept here, closely guarded. Then, one afternoon, a couple of scouts galloped into camp and reported something that threw the whole encampment into great excitement. For a few minutes there was an excited Babel of voices, out of which Thure could get nothing understandable; and then all made a rush for their saddles and horses, and, in less than half an hour, the whole body of men were mounted.

"I wonder," and Thure's eyes sparkled and his face flushed, as he turned to Bud, who sat on a horse close by his side, and whispered excitedly, "if all this hurry doesn't mean that the Americans are on our trail. Maybe it is Dad and Uncle Frank and Rex and Hammer Jones, with Captain Fremont and Kit Carson back of them! Something has surely happened to frighten the Mexicans. Oh, I hope that it is; and that they get Padilla, if they do not get another Mexican!"

"Yes, it must be that!" and Bud's face and eyes glowed with hope and excitement. "I knew that our dads would lose no time in getting on our trails, once they knew of our capture. Oh, if it only is, and, if they only get a hold of that Padilla, I'll be the happiest boy in all California! But," and he leaned forward until his mouth was close to Thure's ear and lowered his voice so that the nearest soldier could not hear, "can't we do something to let them know that they are on the right trail for sure? Like—"

At that moment a hand caught Bud by the shoulder and roughly jerked him upright in his saddle and another man pushed his horse between the horses of the two boys, effectually stopping all further communication between them. But a glance from Thure's eyes told Bud that his words had been understood. An instant later the command to start was given and the troop of horsemen galloped rapidly off, in the direction of San Rafael, as near as Thure could calculate.

As they rode along both boys tried to think of something they could do, which would tell their fathers that they were on the right trail; for neither of the lads doubted that it was the coming of Americans that had sent the Mexicans off in such a hurry, nor that their fathers were with them. But, on each side of each lad rode a Mexican soldier, whose watchful eyes were on them all the time; and the most that either lad could do was to twist off a cou-

ple of buttons from his coat and drop them, hoping that the keen eyes of some of the following Americans would find them and that Mr. Conroyal or Mr. Randolph would recognize them as having come from the coat of his son.

Even when night came the Mexicans did not stop, but pushed on as fast as their horses' legs and the darkness permitted. This made the two boys feel more sure than ever that their reasoning had been correct, and told them that the chase was a close one, and kept them intensely excited through the long ride of the dark night; for the cracks of the pursuing Americans' rifles might come at any moment! Besides, if the slightest opportunity offered to slip away in the darkness, they intended to take it.

However, not a suspicious sign or sound broke the silence of the night; and, as soon as it had become dark, Padilla himself had taken his station directly behind Thure and Bud, grinning at them until his white teeth showed in a hyena smile, as he did so, and had kept the place all night; and, with the feel of his cruel eyes on them, all thought of escape that night had left the two lads.

A little after sunrise the next morning the Mexicans came to a rude house, built on the edge of a plain some seventy-five yards from a small grove of brushwood; and now, feeling confident that they had both outwitted and outmarched their pursuers, the Mexicans halted here to eat their breakfast and

to give their tired horses a short rest and to allow them to feed on the grass.

Thure and Bud and a number of other Americans, who had been taken prisoners by Captain de la Torre, were shut up in the house, which was built of adobe, with small narrow windows and but one door; and a couple of soldiers were stationed at the door to keep guard over them. One of the windows looked out in the direction of the little grove of brushwood. Thure and Bud at once made for this window, while the other prisoners, tired with their long ride, threw themselves down on the floor near the middle of the single room the building contained.

"They don't know Americans like Dad and Uncle Frank and Rex and Dill and Hammer Jones as well as we do," Thure said, as the two boys peered anxiously out of the window in the direction of the little grove, "or they would not be so careless as to stop, even to eat breakfast, within such a short distance of such a fine hiding-place. Why, if dad and the rest are after them, they can crawl up into that grove and take pot-shots at them!"

"Sure," agreed Bud; "but, I reckon, the Mexies think the Americans won't have the pluck or the skill to follow their trail during the night. Just as if a little thing like that would bother old trappers and hunters, like our dads and Frank Holt and Hammer Jones and Rex and Dill," and Bud smiled scornfully.

"Why, Kit Carson or Hammer Jones could follow such a trail as we made in the pitch dark; and it lacked a lot of being that dark last night," and Thure returned Bud's smile. "I should not be at all surprised, if they were creeping up behind that grove right now. Jimminny, but won't they make things lively for the Mexicans, if they are?"

"You bet!" was Bud's emphatic reply. "But, they will have to be getting here soon, or they'll find the game gone," and his eyes turned anxiously to the Mexicans, who were hurrying along their breakfast preparations in a way that told him that their stay there would be short.

"Hi, thar, boys!" now called one of the prisoners, an old hunter. "Any signs of any grub? I'm hungry enough tew eat beaver skins, hair an' all."

"Yes," Thure laughed back, "there are plenty of signs of something to eat, but none of them point this way."

"They don't, hey!" and the old hunter clenched one of his big fists. "Wal, if they don't start somethin' that looks like eatin' our way afore long, I'll begin on that Mexie, tough as he looks. So help me Moses, if I don't!" and he glared so fiercely at one of the Mexican guards, who at that moment had thrust his head in the doorway, that the fellow jerked it back in startled fright.

"He must have thought that you were going to start right off," grinned Thure, as the head suddenly vanished. "I—" and then he felt the sudden

grip of Bud's hand on his arm and turned quickly to the window.

"Look, look there!" Bud whispered excitedly. "There near the center of the grove, where the brush is thin. I am sure I saw something moving among the bushes, something big like a man. There, there it is again! Two—three—four of them! Oh, if it only is Dad and the rest!"

"It is! It must be!" and Thure's face was white as milk. "Now, if the Mexicans do not discover them until they all get into position," and he turned his eyes anxiously to his captors, who were moving busily about the camp, too intent on getting something to eat to take much notice of what was going on around them—"Ah-h-h!"

At that moment a Mexican, who happened to be standing facing the grove, uttered a startled yell and whirled about. But, before the yell had fully left his mouth, he spun around on both feet and fell headlong to the ground. At the same instant the excited boys saw a dozen or more puffs of smoke dart out from among the bushes of the grove and heard the crack! crack! of rifles and the shouts of American voices.

"Americanos! Americanos!" yelled the startled Mexicans, jumping for their guns and rushing madly to shelter. In a moment the one room in the little house was crowded almost to suffocation with cursing, wildly-excited Mexicans. However, the officers quickly rallied the men; and a sergeant,

at the head of the bravest, gallantly charged the grove.

During all this excitement Thure and Bud had kept their white faces glued to the window, forgetful or careless of the risk they were running of being shot unknowingly by their friends.

"They can't do it! They can never drive them from the woods!" Thure exclaimed, when he saw the sergeant and his men charging so bravely; and yet the anxiety in his voice belied the confidence his words expressed. There might not be, there could not be, judging from the shots, over a couple of dozen of the Americans; and the Mexicans were eighty-six strong, four to one! Consequently, it was with the keenest of anxiety that the eyes of both boys watched that charging line.

Half of the distance was passed on the run; half a dozen men had fallen; but still, led by the brave sergeant, they rushed on.

"Oh, if we only had our guns! If we could only do something to help!" mourned Thure, almost beside himself with anxiety and excitement. "It is terrible to be cooped up in here and unable to lift a helping hand, while our friends are fighting for our lives—their own lives—Ah-h-h! They have got him!" he cried, as the sergeant crumpled up and plunged to the ground. "They are breaking! They are on the run! Hurrah, we have licked them! Now, we—"

A strong hand jerked him rudely from the win-

dow. At the same moment another hand jerked Bud from the window. And both boys turned to find themselves in the grip of two big Mexicans, with Padilla, his drawn sword in his hand, standing within arm-reach of them, his little black eyes gleaming into their faces like the eyes of an angry snake.

"Quick!" he called to the two men who had hold of the boys. "Drag them with you. If they offer too much resistance, knock them senseless," and placing himself at their head, he forced an opening for them through the crowd, prodding those who did not get out of his way quick enough, with his naked sword.

Thure and Bud yelled and struggled with all their might, until each received a blow on his head with the butt of a heavy pistol that stopped all his yelling and struggling for the time being.

When the boys again recovered consciousness, they hung across the pommels of the saddles of the two big Mexicans, who were urging their horses over the level of the valley at their utmost speed. In front of them galloped Padilla; and close behind them they heard the hoof-thuds of a number of galloping horses, while, from a great distance, came the sound of the cheering of men—the shouts of the victorious Americans.

For half an hour their captors galloped on, without slacking the speed of their horses in the least; and then they halted long enough in a little grove of

trees to place Thure and Bud each on the back of an extra horse, which they had brought with them for this purpose. The change was a most agreeable one to the boys; for every bone in their bodies was aching from the cramped and awkward position in which they had hung across the galloping horses.

Padilla, the moment the two boys were in their saddles, rode up close to them.

"Listen," he said, in his disjointed English, speaking rapidly. "You try escape, my men shoot—kill. No try escape, not hurt—not now."

"You let us go at once," Thure broke in angrily. It had been a terrible blow to the two boys to be thus carried away at the very moment the victorious Americans were rushing to their rescue, and their tempers were strained to the breaking point. "If you don't, Kit Carson and dad and Hammer Jones, with a lot of good men back of them, will take your trail; and they will get you. I don't care where you take us or what you do with us, they will get you, you cowardly, black-faced Mexican skunk! You—"

At a motion of Padilla's hand, one of the men thrust a dirty piece of blanket into Thure's mouth, abruptly choking back his wrathful words.

"No time talk now," Padilla snarled. "But soon, when I get where no Kit Carson, no big dad, no big Hammer Jones can find, then I talk, then I talk," and the venomous eyes that glared into Thure's eyes seemed almost capable of ejecting poi-

son. "Now, we must ride swift. Forward!" and he struck spurs into his horse and galloped off, followed by his men, with Thure and Bud riding in their midst, their horses lashed to the right speed by the men riding by their sides.

There were twelve men with Padilla; and a glance into their faces told the boys that all were of the lowest type of the Mexican soldier, which meant that most of them had been criminals in Mexico, who had been sent to serve as soldiers in California, instead of to jail, to be a public expense, in Mexico. All were well mounted and armed; and, led by Padilla on a large black horse, rode as if they feared death was following hard on their trail.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE CAVE OF THE DEAD

ALL through that long day Thure and Bud cast longing glances backward over the trail, hoping to see some signs of the pursuit that both felt sure must be riding hard after them; but the sight of no galloping horsemen gladdened their eyes and their hopes sank with the sun.

"I am sure," Thure said dejectedly, when at last long after sundown Padilla ordered a halt, to rest their tired horses and to get something to eat, "if our dads were along with the Americans they would have started on our trail the moment they found out that Padilla had carried us off with him. Just before I was knocked senseless I saw the old hunter and he saw us struggling in the hands of Padilla and his men; and so he could tell what had become of us."

"Yes," agreed Bud, "if he escaped. But, maybe, the Mexicans got away with all of the prisoners."

"I don't believe they did," Thure declared, "because, just as I was jerked away from the window, I saw the Americans charging out of the woods, and I don't believe the Mexicans, as badly scared as they were, would stop for anything until they were

out of reach of the rifles of those charging men. They must have got on the wrong trail; or else our dads were not with the Americans. Say, but it was hard luck to have Padilla grab us just at that moment," and his face clouded.

"Yes, it sure was tough luck, just when our friends were about to rescue us; but," and Bud's face brightened, "we'll get the best of Padilla yet. Just keep up your pluck and see if we don't. Now," and he lowered his voice. (A swift glance around had told him that none of the Mexicans stood within hearing of low-spoken words.) "I think our best plan will be to act as if we had given up all hope of rescue or escape and to do as little as we can to rile the temper of Padilla. It will help to throw him and his men off their guard; and, maybe, they'll get a little careless and give us a chance to escape. So, no matter what Padilla says or does, let's try and not show any temper; but just act as if we had lost heart completely and didn't have pluck enough left to get mad at anything."

"I reckon you are right," agreed Thure; "and I'll jam the cork down tight on my temper, when Padilla comes near me; but," and he gritted his teeth grimly, "I'll do some powerful mad thinking inside of me."

"All right," smiled Bud; "only so you keep the cork in and don't let the mad thinking out."

At this moment a couple of the Mexicans came up to the boys with a little food, which they received

and ate in dejected silence, not altogether assumed; for the day had been one of bitter disappointments to both of them and they had begun to fear that their fathers had lost their trail, if, indeed, they had been on it at all.

However, Padilla evidently still dreaded pursuit; for, hardly had the boys eaten their last mouthful of food, when he gave the order to mount, and the flight was resumed, but the speed was much slower now on account of the darkness of the night.

All night long the tired boys were compelled to sit in their saddles, while their tired horses stumbled along over the rough ground. At first they tried to keep track of the route they were going; but soon they became so tired and sleepy that they could not hold their minds down to anything and lost all sense of direction. Indeed, once or twice they fell asleep in their saddles and might have fallen from the backs of their horses, if they had not been rudely awakened by the Mexican soldiers who rode close to their sides jabbing the points of their knives into them. The sudden start of pain and surprise this caused the boys to give always brought a loud laugh from their guards, who appeared to think it a great joke. The boys, although they could feel the point of the knife, could not see the point of the joke; and it required all their self-control to keep from losing their tempers and telling the knife-jabbers exactly what they thought of them. But, somehow, they managed to keep the corks in the bottles of their

wrath and all their "mad thinking" inside of them and to act as if they did not have left enough courage or pluck to resent anything.

A little before sunrise they entered a wild and desolate region of great rocks and deep canyons split in the sides of mountains whose tops were white with snow. An hour later they rode down into a deep fissure, with walls of perpendicular rock so high that when the boys looked upward all they could see of the sky was a narrow ribbon of light that did not appear to be over a foot wide. For a couple of miles they picked their way along the rough bottom of this fissure and stopped, at last, in front of the low arched mouth of a cave.

All dismounted here and Padilla and one of the men entered the cave. In about five minutes they returned, each carrying a bundle of pine torches under his arm. Then, lighting half a dozen of the torches, which were distributed among the Mexicans, Padilla led the way into the cave. The men followed in single file, each man leading his horse. For a long distance, some three hundred paces the boys judged, though they did not count their steps, the top of the cave was so low that the horses were obliged to lower their heads as they moved along and so narrow that two of them could not walk abreast. Then, suddenly, this passageway widened out into a lofty and broad chamber, with a smooth sand-covered floor and walls and ceiling that sparkled in the light of the torches as if incrustated with precious

jewels. Here, with many expressions of pleased satisfaction, Padilla and his men halted and at once set about making themselves as comfortable as possible. Evidently they had reached one of the secret strongholds of the band; for, scattered around on the sand, were many evidences of past occupancy. But, just now, all, including the boys, were too tired and sleepy to take much note of anything; and the men, it will be remembered that now they had been almost constantly on the backs of their horses for twenty-four hours, unsaddled and unbridled their horses as quickly as possible, threw their blankets down on the sand, and, tumbling down on top of them, were sound asleep almost as soon as their bodies touched the blankets.

"We must try and keep awake," Thure whispered eagerly to Bud, when he saw the tired men falling to sleep all around him. "I don't believe any guard that they will put over us can keep awake; and, if they do not tie us up good and tight, we can get away."

"Yes," answered Bud, "but we must make them think that we are too dead tired to keep our eyes open a minute and pretend to fall so sound asleep that it would take an earthquake to awaken us; and—and if Padilla doesn't look out, he'll find us missing when he wakes up."

But Padilla did look out—trust him for that; for, at the moment Bud spoke the last words, both boys saw him, followed by two men, one of whom car-

ried a lighted torch, start in their direction. He stopped directly in front of the two lads.

"Too tired talk now," he said; "but, when I sleep and you sleep, then we talk, where no big dad, no big Hammer Jones can find. Come; I show where sleep," and, with a grin on his evil face, he motioned the torchbearer to move on.

Thure and Bud, without a word, followed the man with the torch. Behind them walked Padilla and the other man. Straight across the great chamber walked the man, to where a black opening not much larger than a wolf hole showed in the wall of solid rock, and stopped in front of the hole.

"There your bed room," and, chuckling, Padilla pointed to the hole. "When you in, we shut door by rolling big rock in front of it," and he indicated a huge rock that lay within a foot of the entrance to the hole. "Now, crawl in. We give torch for light," and, at a nod of his head, the man holding the torch handed it to Thure.

Thure took the torch mechanically and stared at the hole opening hesitatingly. Where did it lead, that dark hole in the bowels of the mountain? He did not like the look on the face of Padilla, as he ordered him to crawl in, nor the looks of the two men as they now stood grinning at him.

"Go in!" and Padilla made a peremptory motion toward the mouth of the hole. "Go in, or we push you in without light."

"Willingly," and Thure's eyes flashed angrily

into the face of Padilla. "Whatever is in there, it can't be worse than being out here with you," and, holding the torch in front of him, he bent down and began to crawl into the opening.

The hole was oval in shape and just large enough to enable Thure to move forward comfortably on his hands and knees. Ahead of him, as far as the light of the torch penetrated the darkness, he could see nothing but the opening made by the small passageway through the rocks. He heard Bud crawling into the hole behind him and crept on, determined to go as far as he could while he had the light of the torch to show him where he was.

"Follow close behind me," he called back, "and we will try and find out where this hole leads to."

"Go ahead. I'm coming," came back the cheery voice of Bud. "I'll follow—ouch! Say, what are you stopping for? I nearly knocked my nose out of joint on the heel of your boot."

Bud was not half as easy in his mind, as his light talk might lead you to believe. He was trembling more than a little and many drops of cold sweat stood out on his face and along his spinal column; but, I am sure, none of you boys will wonder at this, when you stop to think where he and Thure were—creeping along through a little black hole, hundreds of feet from the surface of the earth and the bright warm sunlight, not knowing what horror the next moment might reveal.

Thure had uttered a startled exclamation, as Bud

spoke; and the next instant the horrified boy saw the light and his friend's body suddenly drop from sight. For a moment he was too terrified to utter a word, to make a move, then his voice rang out in a piercing shriek.

"Thure! Thure! where are you? What has happened?" he called.

But, not a sound came from the vanished boy! Only, now Bud had enough of his wits back to notice that the light of the torch still shone ahead of him, although the torch itself was out of sight. Evidently Thure had not fallen far. But, why was he silent?

With every muscle in his young body quivering with dread, Bud crept forward to find out what had happened; and, suddenly, found his head thrust out into a little chamber hollowed out of the solid rock. The room was not over twenty feet across and, perhaps, as many feet high. The floor was some seven feet below the opening where Bud lay staring down on the white face of Thure, who stood near the center of the room, the torch held rigidly in his hand and his eyes fixed on the opposite side of the room, where, with their backs propped against the wall, sat, grinning, the mummified bodies of four men and two women.

Both boys understood now the look on Padilla's face, when he had driven them into the hole and why he had given them the lighted torch, which soon would burn out and leave them alone with the

dead in a darkness greater than that of the bottomless pit.

Silently Bud dropped to the floor by the side of Thure and placed a trembling hand upon his shoulder.

"Horrible," he murmured. "This is horrible! What can it mean?"

"It means," and Thure turned a face to him from which every drop of red blood seemed to have fled, "that, in a few days we will be sitting by their sides, with our backs against the wall and our shrunken eyes staring out into the darkness. This is our tomb! This is Padilla's revenge!"

"No, no. It cannot be that. Come, let us hurry back through the tunnel," and Bud gripped Thure fiercely by the arm. "Even Padilla could not be so cruel as to leave us here to die a horrible death by the side of the horrible dead. Come," and, pulling Thure, he started toward the opening whence the two boys had entered.

"Look!" and Thure suddenly jerked himself free from Bud's hand and pointed with trembling finger to the flame of the torch. "See the blaze of the torch! It is moved by a current of air and away from the opening through which we came. There may be another way out than the way we came in. Quick; let us look while we have the light of the torch to aid us."

"You are right," and Bud's eyes fairly glowed with excitement. "The blaze points right over

there, where that little pile of rocks is," and he sprang across the room to a little heap of rocks that lay piled against one of the walls of the cave and began frantically throwing the rocks aside. "You hold the torch and I'll see what there is here."

Some of the rocks were large, all that Bud could lift, and it was fully ten minutes before he came to the last one, a large flat stone a good six feet across. This he vainly tried to move for a minute.

"You'll have to help me, Thure. Put down your torch and give me a hand," and, panting with his exertions, Bud turned a flushed face to Thure.

Thure quickly set the torch up between two stones and gripped the flat rock close by the side of Bud's hands.

"Now, when I count three, lift all together," he said. "One—two—THREE! LIFT!"

Both boys strained every muscle in their strong young bodies. Slowly the great stone gave, until, at last, by a tremendous effort, they flung it over backward on the floor of the cave; and stood staring down into a jagged black hole, through which a strong current of air was blowing.

"Hurrah!" yelled Thure; and then his flushed face whitened, for into what new dangers and terrors might not that black hole lead them? But, in a moment, his face brightened again. "See!" he exclaimed, "the air smells as fresh and as pure as if it came through an opened window. It can't be far to the open air. Come, let us hurry, while we

have light," and he caught up the torch and thrust it into the opening.

The hole, evidently tunneled through the solid rock by the wonderful hand of nature, was some four feet high by two feet wide, with smooth water-worn sides and top and, so far as the light of the torch permitted Thure to see, slanted upward.

"Let me take the torch and I'll go ahead," and Bud, who was looking over Thure's shoulder, reached out a trembling hand to take the torch.

"No; you follow close behind," Thure said, and, with a last wondering look toward the mummies, sitting in their ghastly loneliness propped against the wall of the cave, he bent over and, holding the torch thrust out in front of him, stepped into the opening.

"If they had only known of this passageway, they might have escaped," murmured Bud, as, with a shuddering glance in the direction of the mummies, he stepped into the hole after Thure.

For some two hundred feet, with scarcely a change in its contour, the hole continued on a slight incline upward. Then it became wider and higher; and, suddenly making an abrupt turn, gladdened the eyes of the hurrying boys with a sight of the white light of the outer world.

Thure's yell of delight was echoed by Bud's; and both boys started on the run for the opening.

Again the tunnel narrowed down until it was not over three feet high; and the two boys were com-

pelled to crawl out of it, one behind the other, on their hands and knees.

Both boys uttered exclamations of astonishment the moment they stood upright outside in the clear sunlight and looked around them. They were standing on a narrow ledge of rocks, some two hundred feet above a beautiful little cuplike valley that appeared from where they were to be completely surrounded by a wall of almost perpendicular rocks. The valley was nearly round in shape and not more than a mile in diameter. Near its center was a small pool of clear water, fringed round with willow trees, that looked to the boys like a mirror framed in green. A number of deer and antelopes were quietly feeding on the rich verdure of the valley.

"It's like a picture of the Garden of Eden!" cried Thure. "I never saw a more beautiful valley."

"Nor I," agreed Bud. "But, just now, I am too anxious to find out how we are to get down and too tired and hungry to admire its beauties. There must be a way down. Come on; let's see if we can find it," and he started along the narrow ledge, which where they were was not more than four or five feet wide.

It was now well for our two young friends that both were experienced mountain climbers and that their heads were steady and their feet sure and their hands strong; for the path downward, if such it might be called, ran along the nearly perpendicu-

lar face of the side of the mountain, and sometimes was not over a foot in width and sometimes they were obliged to lower themselves from one jagged point of projecting rock to another, where there were no other hand- or foot-holds and where a fall would have meant instant death. But, at last, flushed and panting with the exertions they had made, they stood on the level of the valley.

“My, but I don’t feel as if I wanted to move again for a year,” Thure said, as he threw himself down at full-length on a soft bed of grass.

“Neither do I; but, I reckon, we had better keep moving, if we do not want to fall into the hands of Padilla again,” Bud declared, as he threw himself down by the side of Thure. “He might go into the little cave to see what had become of us almost any time. Jimminy, but I would just like to see his face, when he finds out that we have escaped and sees how we did it! I’ll bet he will do some swearing in Mexican; and he’ll be as hot on our trail as a hungry wolf on the trail of an old buffalo. That’s why I think we ought to be getting out of this valley just as soon as we can.”

“I know we had,” Thure agreed, “and we will start just as soon as we have rested up a bit and go until we think we have found some safe hiding-place and then we will lie down and sleep—sleep, why, I don’t feel as if I had had a wink of sleep for six years,” and Thure yawned and rubbed his eyes.

"I don't feel as if I could think straight or do anything straight until I have slept."

"That is just the way I feel," Bud declared, yawning and stretching.

For nearly an hour the two boys lay on the grass side by side, fighting desperately to keep awake, and then Bud jumped to his feet.

"Come," he said, "let's be going. If we stay here any longer we will both be asleep before we know it, and like as not be in the hands of Padilla again when we wake up."

"I do not believe Padilla will go into the little cave until he has had his sleep out," Thure affirmed; "but I am not running any risks on Padilla," and he jumped to his feet. "Now, the thing to do is to find a way out of this valley. Come on."

For an hour the two boys searched; and then they found a narrow chasm, only a few feet wide, leading out of the valley. With great difficulty they made their way down this chasm, until they came to a little stream of swift running water. Here they rested for a few minutes and then continued on their way down the stream for a couple of miles, where it entered into a broad valley dotted here and there with little clumps of trees.

"Here is where we sleep," declared Thure, with a longing glance toward the nearest clump of trees. "I don't believe I could keep awake longer, even if I knew Padilla was hard on our trail. We'll crawl

in there out of sight among the bushes and just sleep, sleep."

"All right," agreed Bud. "I reckon it will be safe now. Anyway, I don't feel no more like taking another step than you do. So, come on," and he started for the trees.

The two boys found a little opening among the trees, surrounded by thick brush, and, with sighs of satisfaction, dropped down on a little pile of old leaves; and were sound asleep almost as soon as their bodies touched the leaves. If you will recall to mind the fact that neither boy had had a chance to get a wink of sleep for over thirty hours now, and that during this time both of them had been subjected to great excitement and to the most arduous exertions, you will not wonder at their sleepiness and weariness and that they were so soon lost to everything that was passing on around them.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAN IN BUCKSKIN

IT was a little after noon when Thure and Bud fell asleep in the little clump of trees; and it was a little before noon of the next day when both awoke suddenly, to find the grinning face of Padilla bending over them, and back of him his men. They could hear their horses stamping among the trees near by.

For a moment both boys were too dumbfounded to believe the evidences of their own eyes. They fancied that they must be still asleep and dreaming and lay motionless, staring up blankly into the evil grinning face; and, when at last the terrible truth was forced in upon their senses, they were too utterly crestfallen, too discouraged, to utter a word or to make a motion, but lay still staring blankly up into Padilla's face.

"You surprised, same as I surprised, when go into Cave of Dead to find out why you so still, and not find," and Padilla's grin broadened. "But I find now; and you no get away again. Now, you have long sweet sleep; and now we talk," and the grin left Padilla's face, and the lines around his face

hardened, and his eyes again looked as if they might dart venom out of them.

Thure and Bud shuddered; but still neither spoke a word. What was the use of words under the circumstances.

Padilla now turned and spoke a few quick words to his men. Instantly a number of them seized the boys and, jerking them to their feet, dragged them through the brush to a little cleared opening and tied them to trees. All the men now formed a half circle in front of the two boys; and Padilla, a heavy whip in his hand, stepped out in front of them.

Padilla was always melodramatically garrulous, even when in a rage or when intensely excited, as people of his race are likely to be; and now he had to make his little speech and go through his preliminary flourishes before he got down to business. Then, like a cat, he loved to play with his mouse. For a minute or so he stood directly in front of Thure, saying nothing, but feeling of his whip and shrugging his shoulders and snapping his little black eyes at him and all the time gradually working up his rage, until it broke out in words.

"Your dad whip Padilla like dog, like cur dog," he raged. "Now I whip Americano pig until he squeal—squeal," and, for half an hour, like a man drunk with rage, he raved in front of Thure, many times threatening to strike him, but never once allowing the whip to touch him. Then, all at once,

his wrath seemed to solidify; and Thure knew by the look on his face that the time for action had come and steeled his nerves for the terrible ordeal that he would now be called upon to endure.

So far neither boy had spoken a word. They could find no words to express their feelings. But now Thure's white set lips parted.

"If you strike me a blow, Dad will kill you," he threatened.

Padilla, his face livid with rage, took a quick step toward him and raised his whip.

There was no Four-fingered Jack there now to interfere. Indeed, all the men took a step closer and all fixed their eyes on Padilla and the two boys, their brutal faces showing nothing but savage interest.

"I—I no afraid of big Dad," and Padilla swung back his whip to strike—and stopped, as if frozen stiff in his tracks, his mouth dropping open with astonishment and fear; for, at that instant, a buckskin-clothed figure had glided swiftly and silently from behind the tree to which Thure was bound and now stood directly in front of the boy, a pistol in one hand, a long-barreled rifle in the other.

"Drop that whip and surrender!" said a quiet, imperative voice, that thrilled through Thure like wine, for in it he recognized the voice of Kit Carson. "Surrender, all of you, or my men will shoot to kill. They have your bodies covered with their

rifles." The keen eyes never once left the faces of Padilla and his men, but neither the pistol nor the rifle in his hand was raised threateningly.

The Mexicans all stood stock-still, not daring to make a move, lest a ball from those deadly rifles hidden in the surrounding woods should find their hearts. But Padilla, either because his terror was too great to keep under control, or because at that moment he saw that Kit Carson's eyes were elsewhere and he fancied that he might kill him and escape, suddenly dropped the whip and shot his right hand toward the pistol in his belt.

Thure uttered a startled cry of warning—and two pistols cracked almost simultaneously—and Padilla spun half-way around on his heels and tumbled to the ground, dead, a ball through the center of his forehead, his career of wickedness forever ended.

"No shoot! No shoot! we surrender!" yelled the other Mexicans, now almost frantic with fear.

"Good. Advance, Jones, and secure their weapons. The others keep them covered with their rifles," and Kit Carson lowered the rifle that he had instantly thrown to his shoulder and leveled at one of the men the moment after he had fired at Padilla.

Hammer Jones now rose out of a clump of brush and, with a broad grin on his face, advanced and seized every weapon in the possession of the Mexicans.

"Better tie their hands behind their backs, Ham," advised Kit Carson; and, when this had been done to the very evident satisfaction of the big trapper, Carson summoned in the rest of his men, with a twinkle in his gray eyes; and Noel Conroyal leaped up from the brush and rushed to Thure and cut him free from the tree, while Carson at the same time liberated Bud.

"But—but, where are the rest of you?" asked Thure, when the excitement had died down a little, staring around.

"Thar ain't any rest on us," laughed Ham. "We done it all ourselves; or, rather, Kit Carson done th' most of it. You see, me an' Kit an' Con was a-scoutin' on our own hook, th' rest on 'em is back 'bout ten miles, when we happened tew come intew this valley jest as th' Mexies was a-ridin' up tew this clump of trees; an', as they hadn't seen us, we reckoned 'twould be safe tew investigate what they was a-doin' in here. So we rode up cautious ahind a leetle clump of willows 'bout a hundred yards from this here clump; an', leavin' our hosses thar, crept up through th' tall grass tew whar th' Mexies had tied their hosses among th' trees; an', findin' no guard over th' hosses, we knowed that somethin' mighty interestin' must be a-goin' on a leetle farther on in th' woods, whar we could hear a Mexican spoutin', as if he had pulled th' cork plumb out of his voice; an', of course, we was powerful curious tew see what'n thunder th' Mexie was workin' up

about and tew find out what it was, we crept on toward th' voice.

"Now, I call it one of them 'Mysterious Dispensations of Providence' that them ministers talk 'bout, leastwise for you yunks, though I don't know 'bout th' Mexies," and Ham chuckled, "that we should a-come a-crawlin' through th' brush jest at th' right moment tew spoil Padilla's leetle game of skin-cuttin'; but, I reckon, th' good Lord thought he'd gone far enough in his devilment," and Ham's face grew solemn and his eyes turned to the dead body of the fallen Mexican. "Leastwise we was here; an', if th' Lord didn't lead us I don't know who did, 'cause we'd lost your trail completely and had no more thought of findin' you here than we had of findin' th' king of China."

"But, how could Kit Carson get up so close behind me, unseen by the Mexicans?" broke in Thure, his eyes turning admiringly toward Kit Carson, who now stood quietly talking with one of the prisoners. "I can't see how he did it, or how he dared to face so many Mexicans, knowing he had only two men back of him."

"Wal," and the grin came back on Ham's face, "when your dad saw Padilla prancin' up an' down in front of you an' a-flourishin' that whip as if he was 'bout tew whale th' hide off of you, he was for jumpin' right on top of him then an' thar an' chokin' th' life out of him with his big hands, not mindin' th' other Mexicans no more'n if they wan't thar.

But Kit grabs him by th' arm, an' holds him back, an' shows him how that would be like committin' suicide, without doin' you boys no good, an' like as not givin' most of th' Mexicans a chance tew escape; an' then he p'int's out how, by takin' advantage of a number of trees an' a clump or two of bushes, he thought he could creep up right ahind th' tree whar you was, without bein' seen by th' Mexicans in thar excitement, an' that, if he stepped out sudden like in front of Padilla, an' ordered all on 'em tew surrender or be shot down by his men hidden in th' surroundin' woods, they'd be tew scart an' unsartin tew make any resistance an' we could git 'em all; an', I'll be durned, if th' bluff didn't work!" and Ham chuckled noisily. "Takes Kit tew work a bluff like that! One would have thought from th' way he looked an' talked that he had a man ahind every tree in th' woods," and there was something akin to reverence in the look of the eyes the big fellow turned toward Kit Carson.

Of course Thure and Bud **now** had to relate their adventures, since riding out of Sonoma on their way to Captain Fremont; and then, equally of course, they wanted to know all that had happened while they had been held captive by Padilla—had there been any more fighting between the Mexicans and the Americans? Had Captain Fremont yet joined the Americans? What the news was from the United States about the war with Mexico? And their patriotic young American hearts you may

be sure were greatly rejoiced, when they learned that Captain Fremont had joined the Americans at Sonoma on June 25th, that the stars and stripes had been hoisted in place of the bear flag on July 10th, and that Captain Fremont at the head of his men and a large number of American volunteers was even now marching southward, driving all the Mexican soldiers before him.

"We hain't even had th' chance tew see th' back of a Mexican soldier, since th' scrimmage at the old house near San Rafael, when Padilla got a way with you boys so slick that, if it hadn't a-ben for an old hunter, we wouldn't have known what had become of you," mourned Ham. "All we've had tew do is jest tew march toward 'em an' they'd run afore we could git within eyesight of 'em."

"But, what about the war with Mexico?" inquired Bud anxiously. "Is the United States back of us?"

"That is where we are still a little uncertain," replied Mr. Conroyal. "But we all feel sure that Captain Fremont has had secret instructions from the government at Washington to do as he is doing and that fighting down in Mexico has begun before this. You know we have not seen Captain Fremont for a number of days now; for, just as soon as we learned from the old hunter that Padilla had you boys and we couldn't find his trail, your dad and I," and he nodded to Bud, "started for Fremont's camp as fast as our horses could take us to

get Kit Carson and Hammer Jones and Rex to help us. We knew that if anybody could find the trail, Kit Carson could. Fremont willingly gave them permission to go with us; and we have been on the hunt for you ever since, so we don't know what the latest news is. But, now that we have found you boys, safe and sound, thank God! and have settled all accounts with Padilla," and his eyes rested on the corpse of the dead scoundrel with a look of loathing that even death could not soften, "we must hasten back to Fremont; for now is the time that every loyal American in California should be back of him with his rifle loaded and his powder horn and bullet pouch filled," and his strong face reflected the light of the patriotism that shone within.

What shall be done with the prisoners? was now the question.

"Seein' as how it won't be handy tew take 'em 'long with us," Ham suggested, "I reckon 'bout th' best thing we can do is tew take all their weapons an' hosses from them an' leave them whar they be, with a warnin' tew git out of th' country as quick as th' Lord will let them."

Kit Carson and Noel Conroyal quickly agreed that this was the best solution of the difficulty under the circumstances; and, accordingly, all the Mexicans' arms and horses were confiscated by our friends, the prisoners left bound in the little woods where they had been captured and the start back for the little army of Fremont at once begun.

CHAPTER XXV

THE STARS AND STRIPES

TWO days later, a short time before sundown, our little party came within sight of the camp of Fremont, pitched in a little valley only a few miles from Monterey. As they drew near to the camp, they heard loud cheering and hurraing and the vociferous, if not tuneful, singing of "The Star Spangled Banner" and other national songs.

"Hurrah, they've got good news of some kind," cried Thure. "Let's hurry up and find out what it is. Come," and he struck the spurs into his horse, and, with Bud galloping by his side, charged into camp.

"What has happened? What's the news?" yelled both boys, as they pulled up their horses in the midst of the excited men.

"Taylor has licked the Mexicans good and plenty down on the Rio Grande!" shouted one of the men, swinging his hat around his head.

"The war is on for sure now; and we've got the United States back of us, Hurrah!" yelled another.

"California is as good as a part of the Union now. Hurrah for the Stars and Stripes!" and like

expressions of enthusiasm and rejoicing came from all parts of the camp.

The boys soon learned that an express had just arrived from Monterey, with the news of the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, in both of which General Taylor was said to have defeated the Mexicans with great slaughter; and, of course, there could be no longer any doubts that the war between the United States and Mexico had actually begun.

That was a great night in the camp of Fremont. Until long after midnight the camp-fires blazed high, and the shouts and the songs of the rejoicing men echoed over the wild silence of the hills and the valleys; but, at last, Thure and Bud found themselves in their blankets, where sleep soon brought forgetfulness of all past excitements.

The next morning the two lads were awakened at sunrise by the sounds of a bugle; and, in a very short time, the breakfast was prepared and eaten, the horses saddled and bridled, the baggage packed on the mules, and everything put in readiness for the march into Monterey, about a two-hours' march.

Thure and Bud, accompanied by their fathers, galloped on ahead of the main body of men. Their mothers and sisters had been sent to Monterey some two weeks before, where both had relatives and where, in case of need, they could place themselves

under the protection of the United States men-of-war then anchored in the harbor, there to await the outcome of the trouble; and both boys were too anxious to see them to wait on the slow march of Fremont and his men, cumbered as they were with their baggage.

The morning was clear and cool, their horses exceptionally speedy, and, in little over an hour's time, they were galloping into Monterey. Above the blockhouse recently built on a hill floated the stars and stripes. This was a glorious sight to the two American boys, who had been taught to think that flag the emblem of the most illustrious nation on the face of the earth. On the waters of the harbor rode four American men-of-war; and through the streets of the little town marched armed companies of marines from their decks.

The hearts of both boys beat high with exultation and pride. They felt that they walked on United States soil again, that, at last, their loved California was free; and, when they rode into the yard of the house where their mothers were staying and were nearly smothered in their dear arms the moment they sprang off their horses, I do not believe you could have found two happier or prouder boys in all the Great Western World.

A half an hour later, when the swift-moving tongues of the two lads had but partly related the story of their adventures, Thure suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Come," he cried joyously, "let us all go and help welcome Fremont and his men, when they come marching into town. He and they are the real liberators of California."

"Splendid! Hurrah!" shouted Iola Conroyal and Ruth Randolph jumping to their feet and rushing away to get mantillas for themselves and their mothers to wear over their heads.

In a few minutes they were back; and Thure, with his mother on one arm and Iola on the other, and Bud, with his mother on one arm and Ruth on the other, started for the outskirts of the little town to be near the point where Fremont and his men would enter.

They had hardly reached a suitable place on a little elevation near the road along which Fremont would pass, when a great cloud of dust in the distance heralded the approach of the gallant young officer and his hardy followers. Then, presently, appeared a long file of dust-covered horsemen, riding two and two, with Captain Fremont at their head. Directly behind him rode five Delaware Indians, his bodyguard, and behind them followed the long line of his men, dressed in deerskin, with their long-barreled rifles held by one hand across the pommels of their saddles—their dark faces showing redly underneath their broad hats and their whole appearance indicative of the hardy independent fearless lives they had lived in the wild freedom of the plains and the mountains.

Thure and Bud and the two girls could hardly contain themselves, as the cavalcade drew near; and even their mothers caught the contagion of their enthusiasm and waved their mantillas and cheered as loudly as did the children themselves. But, when Fremont came abreast of where they stood, and lifted his hat to the ladies and bowed and smiled to the boys; well, Thure and Bud just danced up and down and waved their hats and yelled, and the two girls just danced up and down and waved their mantillas and yelled, and Mrs. Conroyal and Mrs. Randolph just stood still and waved their mantillas and yelled, until their arms were lame and their voices hoarse for a week later.

And, right here, with the cheers for Fremont ringing in their ears, the stars and stripes floating in the air above their heads, their perils and hardships all safely surmounted and California practically won for the Union, is a good place to say our farewells to Thure and Bud, and to their two charming sisters, Iola and Ruth, and to all the brave men who marched with Fremont in the Conquest of California.

We, who live in an after generation, owe them much.

Let us honor their memories.

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